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The Beloved Vagabond
The Morals of Marcus Ordeyne
Idols
Derelicts
The Usurper
The White Dove
A Study in Shadows
At the Gate of Samaria
The Demagogue and Lady Phayre

WHERE LOVE IS

A NOVEL

BY

WILLIAM J. LOCKE

"Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith"

The Proverbs of Solomon

NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY, MCMVII
LONDON: JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD

29403A

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WHERE LOVE IS

WHERE LOVE IS

Chapter I

THE FIRST GLIMPSE

"HAVE you dined at Ranelagh lately?" asked Norma Hardacre.

"I have never been there in my life," replied Jimmie Padgate. "In fact," he added simply, "I am not quite sure whether I know where it is."

"Yours is the happier state. It is one of the dullest spots in a dull world."

"Then why on earth do people go there?"

The enquiry was so genuine that Miss Hardacre relaxed her expression of handsome boredom and laughed.

"Because we are all like the muttons of Panurge," she said. "Where one goes, all go. Why are we here to-night?"

"To enjoy ourselves. How could one do otherwise in Mrs. Deering's house?"

"You have known her a long time, I believe," remarked Norma, taking the opportunity of directing the conversation to a non-contentious topic.

"Since she was in short frocks. She is a cousin of King's — that 's the man who took you down to dinner —"

She nodded. "I have known Mr. King many weary ages."

"And he has never told me about you!"

"Why should he?"

She looked him full in the face, with the stony calm of the fashionable young woman accustomed to take excellent care of herself. Her companion met her stare in whimsical confusion. Even so ingenuous a being as Jimmie Padgate could not tell a girl he had met for the first time that she was beautiful, adorable, and graced with divine qualities above all women, and that intimate acquaintance with her must be the startling glory of a lifetime.

"If I had known you for ages," he replied prudently, "I should have mentioned your name to Morland King."

"Are you such friends then?"

"Fast friends: we were at school together, and as I was a lonely little beggar I used to spend many of my holidays with his people. That is how I knew Mrs. Deering in short frocks."

"It 's odd, then, that I have n't met you about before," said the girl, giving him a more scrutinising glance than she had hitherto troubled to bestow upon him. A second afterwards she felt that her remark might have been in the nature of an indiscretion, for her companion had not at all the air of a man moving in the smart world to which she belonged. His dress-suit was old and of lamentable cut; his shirt-cuffs were frayed; a little bone stud, threatening every moment to slip the button-hole, precariously secured his shirt-front. His thin, iron-grey hair was untidy; his moustache was ragged, innocent of wax or tongs or any of the adventitious aids to masculine adornment. His aspect gave the impression, if not of poverty, at least of narrow means and humble ways of life. Although he had sat next her at dinner, she had paid little attention to

him, finding easier entertainment in her conversation with King on topics of common interest, than in possible argument with a strange man whom she heard discussing the functions of art and other such head-splitting matters with his right-hand neighbour. Indeed, her question about Ranelagh when she found him by her side, later, in the drawing-room was practically the first she had addressed to him with any show of interest.

She hastened to repair her maladroit observation by adding before he could reply, —

"That is rather an imbecile thing to say considering the millions of people in London. But one is apt to talk in an imbecile manner after a twelve hours' day of hard racket in the season. Don't you think so? One's stock of ideas gets used up, like the air at the end of a dance."

"Not if you keep your soul properly ventilated," he answered.

The words were, perhaps, not so arresting as the manner in which they were uttered. Norma Hardacre was startled. A little shutter in the back of her mind seemed to have flashed open for an elusive second, and revealed a prospect wide, generous, alive with free-blowing airs. Then all was dark again before she could realise the vision. She was disconcerted, and in a much more feminine way than was habitual with her she glanced at him again. This time she lost sight of the poor, untidy garments, and found a sudden interest in the man's kind, careworn face, and his eyes, wonderfully blue and bright, set far apart in the head, that seemed to look out on the world with a man's courage and a child's confidence. She was uncomfortably conscious of being in contact with a personality widely different from that of her usual masculine associates. This her training

and habit of mind caused her to resent; despising the faint spiritual shock, she took refuge in flippancy.

"I fear our Tobin tubes get choked up in London," she said with a little laugh. "Even if they did n't they are wretched things, which create draughts; so anyway our souls are free from chills. Look at that woman over there talking to Captain Orton — every one knows he 's paymaster-general. A breath of fresh air in Mrs. Chance's soul would give it rheumatic fever."

The abominable slander falling cynically from young lips brought a look of disapproval into Jimmie Padgate's eyes.

"Why do you say such things?" he asked. "You know you don't believe them."

"I do believe them," she replied defiantly. "Why should n't one believe the bad things one hears of one's neighbours? It 's a vastly more entertaining faith than belief in their virtues. Virtue — being its own reward — is deadly stale to one's friends and unprofitable to oneself."

"Cynicism seems cheap to-day," said Jimmie, with a smile that redeemed his words from impertinence. "Won't you give me something of yourself a little more worth having?"

Norma, who was leaning back in her chair fanning herself languidly, suddenly bent forward, with curious animation in her cold face.

"I don't know who you are or what you are," she exclaimed. "Why should you want more than the ordinary futilities of after-dinner talk?"

"Because one has only to look at you," he replied, "to see that it must be very easy to get. You have beauty inside as well as outside, and everybody owes what is beautiful and good in them to their fellow-creatures."

"I don't see why. According to you, women ought to go about like mediæval saints."

"Every woman is a saint in the depths of her heart," said Jimmie.

"You are an astonishing person," replied Norma.

The conversation ended there, for Morland King came up with Constance Deering: he florid, good-looking, perfectly groomed and dressed, the type of the commonplace, well-fed, affluent Briton; she a pretty, fragile butterfly of a woman. Jimmie rose and was led off to another part of the room by his hostess. King dropped into the chair Jimmie had vacated.

"I see you have been sampling my friend Jimmie Padgate. What do you make of him?"

"I have just told him he was an astonishing person," said Norma.

"Dear old Jimmie! He 's the best fellow in the world," said King, laughing. "A bit Bohemian and eccentric — artists generally are —"

"Oh, he 's an artist?" inquired Norma.

"He just manages to make a living by it, poor old chap! He has never come off, somehow."

"Another neglected genius?"

"I don't know about that," replied Morland King in a matter-of-fact way, not detecting the sneer in the girl's tone. "I don't think he 's a great swell — I 'm no judge, you know. But he has had a bad time. Anyway, he always comes up smiling. The more he gets knocked the more cheerful he seems to grow. I never met any one like him. The most generous, simple-minded beggar living."

"He must be wonderful to make you enthusiastic," said Norma.

"Look at him now, talking to the Chance woman as if she were an angel of light."

Norma glanced across the room and smiled contemptuously.

"She seems to like it. She 's preening herself as if the wings were already grown. Connie," she called to her hostess, who was passing by, "why have you hidden Mr. Padgate from me all this time?"

The butterfly lady laughed. "He is too precious. I can only afford to give my friends a peep at him now and then. I want to keep him all to myself."

She fluttered away. Norma leaned back and hid a yawn with her fan; then, rousing herself with an effort, made conversation with her companion. Presently another man came up and King retired.

"How is it getting on?" whispered Mrs. Deering.

"Oh, steady," he replied with his hands in his pockets.

"Lucky man!"

Morland King shrugged his shoulders. "The only thing against it is papa and mamma — chiefly mamma. A Gorgon of a woman!"

"You 'll never get a wife to do you more credit than Norma. With that face I wonder she is n't a duchess by now. There *was* a duke once, but a fair American eagle came and swooped him off under Norma's nose. You see, she 's not the sort of girl to give a man much encouragement."

"Oh, I can't stand a woman who throws herself at your head," said King, emphatically.

"What a funny way men have nowadays of confessing to the tender passion!" said Mrs. Deering, laughing.

"What would you have a fellow do?" he asked.

"Spout blank verse about the stars and things, like a Shakespearean hero?"

"It would be prettier, anyhow."

"Well, if you will have it, I'm about as hard hit as a man ever was — there!"

"I'm delighted to hear it," said his cousin.

A short while afterwards the dinner-party broke up.

"I don't know whether you care to mix with utter worldlings like us, Mr. Padgate," said Norma, as she bade him good-bye, "but we are always in on Tuesdays."

"I'll tie him hand and foot and bring him," said King. "Good-night, old chap. I'm giving Miss Hardacre a lift home in the brougham."

Before Jimmie could say yes or no, they were gone. He found himself the last.

"You are certainly not going for another hour, Jimmie," said Mrs. Deering, as he came forward to take leave. "You will sit in that chair and smoke and tell me all about yourself and make me feel good and pretty."

"Very well," he assented, laughing. "Turn me out when it's time for me to go."

It had been the customary formula between them for many years; for Jimmie Padgate lacked the sense of time and kept eccentric hours, and although Connie Deering delighted in her rare confidential chats with him, a woman with a heavy morrow of engagements must go to bed at a reasonable period of the night. She was a woman in the middle thirties, a childless widow after a brief and almost forgotten married life, rich, pleasure-loving, in the inner circle of London society, and possessing the gayest, kindest, most charitable heart in the world. Her friendship with Norma Hardacre had been a thing of recent date.

She had cultivated it first on account of her cousin Morland King; she had ended in enthusiastic admiration.

"It is awfully good of you," she said, when they were comfortably settled down to talk, "to waste your time with my unintelligent conversation."

"There 's no such thing as unintelligent conversation," he declared.

"For a man like you there must be."

"I could hold an intelligent conversation with a rabbit," said Jimmie.

Norma Hardacre, on arriving home, entered the drawing-room, where her mother was reading a novel.

"Well?" said Mrs. Hardacre, looking up.

Norma threw her white silk cloak over the back of a chair.

"Connie sent her love to you."

"Is that all you have to say?" asked her mother, sharply. She was a faded woman who had once possessed beauty of a cold, severe type; but the years had pinched and hardened her features, as they had pinched and hardened her heart. Her eyes were of that steel grey which the light of laughter seldom softens, and her smile was but a contraction of the muscles of the lips. Even this perfunctory tribute to politeness which had greeted Norma's entrance vanished at the second question.

"Morland King drove me home. What a difference there is between a private brougham and the beastly things we get from the livery-stable!"

"He has said nothing?"

"Of course not. I should have told you if he had."

"Whose fault is it?"

Norma made a gesture of impatience. "My fault, if

you like. I don't lay traps to catch him. I don't keep him dangling about me, and I don't flatter his vanities or make appeal to his senses, I suppose. I can't do it."

"Don't behave like a fool, Norma," said Mrs. Hardacre, rapping her book with a paper-knife. "You have got to marry him. You know you have. Your father and I are coming to the end of things. You ought to have married years ago, and when one thinks of the chances you have missed, it makes one mad. Here have we been pinching and scraping—"

"And borrowing and mortgaging," Norma interjected.

"—to give you a brilliant position," Mrs. Hardacre continued, unheeding the interruption, "and you cast all our efforts in our teeth. It's sheer ingratitude. Why you threw over Lord Wyniard I could never make out."

"You seem to forget that, after all, there is a physical side to marriage," said Norma, with a little shudder of disgust.

"I hate indelicacy in young girls," said Mrs. Hardacre, freezingly. "One would think you had been brought up in a public house."

"Then let us avoid indelicate subjects," retorted Norma, opening the first book to her hand. "Where is papa?"

"Oh, how should I know?" said Mrs. Hardacre, irritably.

There was silence. Norma pretended to read, but her thoughts, away from the printed lines, caused her face to harden and her lips to curl scornfully. She had been used to such scenes with her mother ever since she had worn a long frock, and that was seven years ago, when she came out as a young beauty of eighteen. The story of financial embarrassment had lost its fine edge of persuasion by over-telling. She had almost ceased to believe in it, and the

lingering grain of credence she put aside with the cynical feeling that it was no great concern of hers, so long as her usual round of life went on. She had two hundred a year of her own, all of which she spent in dress, so that in that one particular at least, if she chose to be economical, she was practically independent. Money for other wants was generally procurable, with or without unpleasant dunning of her parents. She lived very little in their home in Wiltshire, a beautiful and stately young woman of fashion being a decorative adjunct to smart country-house parties. In London, if she sighed for a more extensive establishment and a more luxurious style of living, it was what she always had done. She had hated the furnished house or flat and the livery-stable carriage ever since her first season. In the same way she had always considered the omission from her scheme of life of a yacht and a villa at Cannes and diamonds at discretion as a culpable oversight on the part of the Creator. But the sordid makeshift of existence to which she was condemned was not a matter of yesterday. In spite of the financial embarrassments of the maternal fable she had noticed no cutting down of customary expenditure. Her father still played the fool on the stock exchange, her mother still attired herself elaborately and disdained to eat otherwise than *à la carte* at expensive restaurants, and she, Norma, went whithersoever the smart set drifted her. She had nothing to do with the vulgarity of financial embarrassments.

As to the question of marriage she was as fully determined as her mother that she should make a brilliant match. She had had two or three disappointments — the unwary duke, for instance. On the other hand she had refused eligibles like Lord Wyniard out of sheer caprice.

The only man who had given her a moment's stir of the pulses, a moment's thought of throwing her cap over the windmills, was a young soldier in the Indian Staff Corps: But he belonged to her second season, before she had really seen the world and grasped the inner meaning of life. Besides, her mother had almost beaten her; and in an encounter between the dragon who guarded the gold of her daughter's affections and the young Siegfried, it was the hero that barely escaped destruction; he fled to India for his life. Norma lost all sight and count of him for three years. Then she heard that he had married a school-fellow of hers and was a month-old father. It was with feelings of peculiar satisfaction and sense of deliverance that she sent her congratulations to him, her love to his wife, and a set of baby shoes to the child. She had cultivated by this time a helpful sardonic humour.

There was now Morland King, within reasonable distance of a proposal. Her experience detected the signs, although little of sentimentality had passed between them. He was young, as marrying men go — a year or two under forty — of good family, fairly good-looking, very well off, with a safe seat in Parliament being kept warm for him by a valetudinarian ever on the point of retirement. Norma meant to accept him. She contemplated the marriage as coldly and unemotionally as King contemplated the seat in Parliament. But through the corrupted tissue of her being ran one pure and virginal thread. She used no lures. She remained chastely aloof, the arts of seduction being temperamentally repugnant to her. Knowledge she had of good and evil (a euphemism, generally, for an exclusive acquaintance with the latter), and she was cynical enough in her disregard of concealment of her knowledge; but she

revolted from using it to gain any advantage over a man. At this period of her life she set great store by herself, and though callously determined on marriage condescended with much disdain to be wooed. Her mother, bred in a hard school, was not subtle enough to perceive this antithesis. Hence the constant scenes of which Norma bitterly resented the vulgarity. "We pride ourselves on being women of the world, mother," she said, "but that does n't prevent our remembering that we are gentlefolk." Whereat, on one occasion, Mr. Hardacre, in his flustering, feeble way, had told Norma not to be rude to her mother, only to draw upon himself the vials of his wife's anger.

He came in now, during the silence that had fallen on the two women — a short, stout, red-faced man, with a bald head, and a weak chin, and a drooping foxy moustache turning grey. He was bursting with an interminable tale of scandal that he had picked up at his club — a respectable institution with an inner coterie of vapid, middle-aged dullards whose cackle was the terror of half London society. It is a superstition among good women that man is too noble a creature to descend to gossip. Ten minutes in the members' smoking-room of the Burlington Club would paralyse the most scandal-mongering tabby of Bath, Cheltenham, or Tunbridge Wells.

"We were sure she was a wrong 'un from the first," he explained in a thick, jerky voice to his listless auditors. "And now it turns out that she was in thick with poor Billy Withers, you know, and when Billy broke his neck — that was through another blessed woman — I 'll tell you all about her by'm bye — when Billy broke his neck, his confounded valet got hold of Mrs. Jack's letters, and how she paid for 'em 's the cream of the story —"

"We need not have that now, Benjamin," said Mrs. Hardacre, with a warning indication that reverence was due to the young.

"Well, of course that's the end of it," replied Mr. Hardacre, in some confusion.

But Norma rose with a laugh of hard mockery.

"The valet entered the service of Lord Wyniard, and now there's a pretty little divorce case in the air, with Jack Dugdale as petitioner and Lord Wyniard as co-respondent. Aren't you sorry, mother, I didn't marry Wyniard and reform him, and save society this terrible scandal?"

Turning from her disconcerted parents, Norma pulled back the thick curtains from the French window and opened one of the doors.

"What are you doing that for?" cried Mrs. Hardacre irritably, as the cold air of a wet May night swept through the room.

"I'm going to try to ventilate my soul," said Norma, stepping on to the balcony.

Chapter II

THE FOOL'S WISDOM

LIKE the inexplicable run on a particular number at the roulette-table, there often seems to be a run on some particular phenomenon thrown up by the wheel of daily life. Such a recurrent incident was the meeting of Norma and Jimmie Padgate during the next few weeks. She met him at Mrs. Deering's, she ran across him in the streets. Going to spend a week-end out of town, she found him on the platform of Paddington Station. The series of sheer coincidences established between them a certain familiarity. When next they met, it was in the crush of an emptying theatre. They found themselves blocked side by side, and they laughed as their eyes met.

"This seems to have got out of the domain of vulgar chance and become Destiny," she said lightly.

"I am indeed favoured by the gods," he replied.

"You don't deserve their good will because you have never come to see me."

Jimmie replied that he was an old bear who loved to growl selfishly in his den. Norma retorted with a reference to Constance Deering. In her house he could growl altruistically.

"She pampers me with honey," he explained.

"I am afraid you 'll get nothing so Arcadian with us," she replied, "but I can provide you with some excellent glucose."

They were moved a few feet forward by the crowd, and then came to a halt again.

"This is my ward, Miss Aline Marden," he said, presenting a pretty slip of a girl of seventeen, who had hung back shyly during the short dialogue, and looked with open-eyed admiration at Jimmie's new friend. "That is how she would be described in a court of law, but I don't mind telling you that really she is my nurse and foster-mother."

The girl blushed at the introduction, and gave him an imperceptible twitch of the arm. Norma smiled at her graciously and asked her how she had liked the play.

"It was heavenly," she said with a little sigh. "Did n't you think so?"

Norma, who had characterised the piece as the most dismal performance outside a little Bethel, was preparing a mendacious answer, when a sudden thinning in the crush brought to her side Mrs. Hardacre, from whom she had been separated. Mrs. Hardacre inquired querulously for Morland King, who had gone in search of the carriage. Norma reassured her as to his ability to find it, and introduced Jimmie and Aline. Mr. Padgate was Mr. King's oldest friend. Mrs. Hardacre bowed disapprovingly, took in with a hard glance the details of Aline's cheap, home-made evening frock, and the ready-made cape over her shoulders, and turned her head away with a sniff. She had been put out of temper the whole evening by Norma's glacial treatment of King, and was not disposed to smile at the nobodies whom it happened to please Norma to patronise.

At last King beckoned to them from the door, and they crushed through the still waiting crowd to join him. By the time Jimmie Padgate and his ward had reached the pavement they had driven off.

"I wonder if we can get a cab," said Jimmie.

"Cab!" cried the girl, taking his arm affectionately. "One would think you were a millionaire. You can go in a cab if you like, but I'm going home in a 'bus. Come along. We 'll get one at Piccadilly Circus."

She hurried him on girlishly, talking of the play they had just seen. It was heavenly, she repeated. She had never been in the stalls before. She wished kind-hearted managers would send them seats every night. Then suddenly:

"Why did n't you tell me how beautiful she was?"

"Who, dear?"

"Why, Miss Hardacre. I think she is the loveliest thing I have ever seen. I could sit and look at her all day long. Why don't you paint her portrait — in that wonderful ivory-satin dress she was wearing to-night? And the diamond star in her hair that made her look like a queen — did you notice it? Why, Jimmie, you are not paying the slightest attention!"

"My dear, I could repeat verbatim every word you have said," he replied soberly. "She is indeed one of the most beautiful of God's creatures."

"Then you 'll paint her portrait?"

"Perhaps, dear," said Jimmie, "perhaps."

Meanwhile in the brougham King was giving Norma an account of Jimmie's guardianship. She had asked him partly out of curiosity, partly to provide him with a subject of conversation, and partly to annoy her mother,

whose disapproving sniff she had noted with some resentment. And this in brief is the tale that King told.

Some ten years ago, John Marden, a brother artist of Jimmie Padgate's, died penniless, leaving his little girl of seven with the alternative of fighting her way alone through an unsympathetic world, or of depending on the charity of his only sister, a drunken shrew of a woman, the wife of a small apothecary, and the casual mother of a vague and unwashed family. Common decency made the first alternative impossible. On their return to the house after the funeral, the aunt announced her intention of caring for the orphan as her own flesh and blood. Jimmie, who had taken upon himself the functions of the intestate's temporary executor, acquiesced dubiously. The lady, by no means sober, shed copious tears and a rich perfume of whisky. She called Aline to her motherly bosom. The child, who had held Jimmie's hand throughout the mournful proceedings, for he had been her slave and playfellow for the whole of her little life, advanced shyly. Her aunt took her in her arms. But the child, with instinctive repugnance to the smell of spirits, shrank from her kisses. The shrew arose in the woman; she shook her vindictively, and gave her three or four resounding slaps on face and shoulders. Jimmie leaped from his chair, tore the scared little girl from the vixen's clutches, and taking her bodily in his arms, strode with her out of the house, leaving the apothecary and his wife to settle matters between them. It was only when he had walked down the street and hailed a cab that he began to consider the situation.

"What on earth am I to do with you?" he asked whimsically.

The small arms tightened round his neck. "Take me to live with you," sobbed the child.

"Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings we learn wisdom. So be it," said Jimmie, and he drove home with his charge.

As neither aunt nor uncle nor any human being in the wide world claimed the child, she became mistress of Jimmie's home from that hour. Her father's pictures and household effects were sold off to pay his creditors, and a little bundle of torn frocks and linen was Aline's sole legacy.

"I happened to look in upon him the evening of her arrival," said King, by way of conclusion to his story. "In those days he managed with a charwoman who came only in the mornings, so he was quite alone in the place with the kid. What do you think I found him doing? Sitting cross-legged on the model-platform with a great pair of scissors and needles and thread, cutting down one of his own night garments so as to fit her, while the kid in a surprising state of *déshabillé* was seated on a table, kicking her bare legs and giving him directions. His explanation was that Miss Marden's luggage had not yet arrived and she must be made comfortable for the night! But you never saw anything so comic in your life."

He leaned back and laughed at the reminiscence, not unkindly. Mrs. Hardacre, bored by the unprofitable tale, stared at the dim streets out of the brougham window. Norma, on friendlier terms with King, the little human story having perhaps drawn them together, joined in the laugh.

"And now, I suppose, when she grows a bit older, Mr. Padgate will marry her and she will be a dutiful little wife and they will live happy and humdrum ever after."

"I hope he will provide her with some decent rags to put on," said Mrs. Hardacre. "Those the child was wearing to-night were fit for a servant maid."

"Jimmie would give her his skin if she could wear it," said Morland, somewhat tartly.

This expression of feeling gave him, for the first time, a special place in Norma's esteem. After all, a woman desires to like the man who in a few months' time may be her husband, and hitherto Morland had presented a negativity of character which had baffled and irritated her. The positive trait of loyalty to a friend she welcomed instinctively, although if charged with the emotion she would have repudiated the accusation. When the carriage stopped at the awning and red strip of carpet before the house in Eaton Square where a dance awaited her, and she took leave of him, she returned his handshake with almost a warm pressure and sent him away, a sanguine lover, to his club.

The next morning Constance Deering, taking her on a round of shopping, enquired how the romance was proceeding.

"He has had me on probation," replied Norma, "and has been examining all my points. I rather think he finds me satisfactory, and is about to make an offer."

"What an idyllic pair you are!" laughed her friend.

Norma took the matter seriously.

"The man is perfectly right. He is on the lookout for a woman who can keep up or perhaps add to his social prestige, who can conduct the affairs of a large establishment when he enters political life, who can possibly give him a son to inherit his estate, and who can wear his family diamonds with distinction — and it does require a

woman of presence to do justice to family diamonds, you know. He looks round society and sees a girl that may suit him. Naturally he takes his time and sizes her up. I have learned patience and so I let him size to his heart's content. On the other hand, what he can give me falls above the lower limit of my requirements, and personally I don't dislike him."

"Mercy on us!" cried Constance Deering, "the man is head over ears in love with you!"

"Then I like him all the better for dissembling it so effectually," said Norma, "and I hope he'll go on dissembling to the end of the chapter. I hate sentiment."

They were walking slowly down Bond Street, and happened to pause before a picture-dealer's window, where a print of a couple of lovers bidding farewell caught Mrs. Deering's attention.

"I call that pretty," she said. "Do you hate love too?"

Norma twirled her parasol and moved away, waiting for the other.

"Love, my dear Connie, is an appetite of the lower middle classes."

"My dear Norma!" the other exclaimed, "I do wish Jimmie Padgate could hear you!"

Norma started at the name. "What has he got to do with the matter?"

"That's one of his pictures."

"Oh, is it?" said Norma, indifferently. But feminine curiosity compelled a swift parting glance at the print.

"I imagine our guileless friend has a lot to learn," she added. "A few truths about the ways of this wicked world would do him good."

"I promised to go and look round his studio to-morrow

morning; will you come and give him his first lesson?" asked Mrs. Deering, mischievously.

"Certainly not," replied Norma.

But the destiny she had previously remarked upon seemed to be fulfilling itself. A day or two afterwards his familiar figure burst upon her at a Private View in a small picture-gallery. His eyes brightened as she withdrew from her mother, who was accompanying her, and extended her hand.

"Dear me, who would have thought of seeing you here? Do you care for pictures? Why haven't you told me? I am so glad."

"Love of Art didn't bring me here, I assure you," replied Norma.

"Then what did?"

Jimmie in his guilelessness had an uncomfortable way of posing fundamental questions. In that respect he was like a child. Norma smiled in silent contemplation of the real object of their visit. At first her mother had tossed the cards of invitation into the waste-paper basket. It was advertising impudence on the part of the painter man, whom she had met but once, to take her name in vain on the back of an envelope. Then hearing accidentally that the painter man had painted the portraits of many high-born ladies, including that of the Duchess of Wiltshire, and that the Duchess of Wiltshire herself — their own duchess, who gave Mrs. Hardacre the tip of her finger to shake and sometimes the tip of a rasping tongue to meditate upon, whom Mrs. Hardacre had tried any time these ten years to net for Heddon Court, their place in the country — had graciously promised to attend the Private View, in her character of Lady Patroness-in-Chief of

the painter man, Mrs. Hardacre had hurried home and had set the servants' hall agog in search of the cards. Eventually they had been discovered in the dust-bin, and she had spent half an hour in cleansing them with bread-crumbs, much to Norma's sardonic amusement. The duchess not having yet arrived, Mrs. Hardacre had fallen back upon the deaf Dowager Countess of Solway, who was discoursing to her in a loud voice on her late husband's method of breeding prize pigs. Norma had broken away from this exhilarating lecture to greet Jimmie.

He kept his eager eyes upon her, still waiting for an answer to his question:

"What did?"

Norma, fairly quick-witted, indicated the walls with a little comprehensive gesture.

"Do you call this simpering, uninspired stuff Art?" she said, begging the question.

"Oh, it's not that," cried Jimmie, falling into the trap. "It's really very good of its kind. Amazingly clever. Of course it's not highly finished. It's impressionistic. Look at that sweeping line from the throat all the way down to the hem of the skirt," indicating the picture in front of them and following the curve, painter fashion, with bent-back thumb; "how many of your fellows in the Academy could get that so clean and true?"

"I have just met Mr. Porteous, who said he could n't stay any longer because such quackery made him sick," said Norma.

Jimmie glanced round the walls. Porteous, the Royal Academician, was right. The colour was thin, the modelling flat, the drawing tricky, the invention poor. A dull soullessness ran through the range of full-length por-

traits of women. He realised, with some distress, the clever insincerity of the painting; but he had known Foljambe, the author of these coloured crimes, as a fellow-student at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, and having come to see his work for the first time, could not bear to judge harshly. It was characteristic of him to expatiate on the only merit the work possessed.

"Mr. Porteous even said," continued Norma, "that it was scandalous such a man should be making thousands when men of genius were making hundreds. It was taking the bread out of their mouths."

"I am sorry he said that," said Jimmie. "I think we ought rather to be glad that a man of poor talent has been so successful. So many of them go to the wall."

"Do you always find the success of your inferior rivals so comforting?" asked Norma. "I don't." She thought of the depredatory American.

Jimmie pushed his hat to the back of his head — a discoloured Homburg hat that had seen much wear — and rammed his hands in his pockets.

"It 's horrible to regard oneself and one's fellow-creatures as so many ghastly fishes tearing one another to pieces so as to get at the same piece of offal. That's what it all comes to, does n't it?"

The picture of the rapt duke as garbage floating on the tide of London Society brought with it a certain humourous consolation. That of her own part in the metaphor did not appear so soothing. Jimmie's proposition being, however, incontrovertible, she changed the subject and enquired after Aline. Why had n't he brought her?

"I am afraid we should have argued about Foljambe's painting," said Jimmie, with innocent malice.

"And we should have agreed about it," replied Norma. She talked about Aline. Morland King had been tale-bearing. It was refreshing, she confessed, once in a way to hear good of one's fellow-creatures: like getting up at six in the morning in the country and drinking milk fresh from the cow. It conferred a sense of unaccustomed virtue. The mention of milk reminded her that she was dying for tea. Was it procurable?

"There's a roomful of it. Can I take you?" asked Jimmie, eagerly.

She assented. Jimmie piloted her through the chattering crowd. On the way they passed by Mrs. Hardacre, still devoting the pearls of her attention to the pigs. She acknowledged his bow distantly and summoned her daughter to her side.

"What are you *affiché*-ing yourself with that nondescript man for?" she asked in a cross whisper.

Norma moved away with a shrug, and went with Jimmie into the crowded tea-room. There, while he was fighting for tea at the buffet, she fell into a nest of acquaintances. Presently he emerged from the crush victorious, and, as he poured out the cream for her, became the unconscious target of sharp feminine glances.

"Who is your friend?" asked one lady, as Jimmie retired with the cream-jug.

"I will introduce him if you like," she replied. He reappeared and was introduced vaguely. Then he stood silent, listening to a jargon he was at a loss to comprehend. The women spoke in high, hard voices, with impure vowel sounds and a clipping of final consonants. The conversation gave him a confused impression of Ascot, a horse, a foreign prince, and a lady of fashion who was characterised as

a "rotter." Allusion was also made to a princely restaurant, which Jimmie, taken thither one evening by King, regarded as a fairy-land of rare and exquisite flavours, and the opinion was roundly expressed that you could not get anything fit to eat in the place and that the wines were poison.

Jimmie listened wonderingly. No one seemed disposed to controvert the statement, which was made by quite a young girl. Indeed one of her friends murmured that she had had awful filth there a few nights before. A smartly dressed woman of forty who had drawn away from the general conversation asked Jimmie if he had been to Cynthia yet. He replied that he very seldom went to theatres. The lady burst out laughing, and then seeing the genuine enquiry on his face, checked herself.

"I thought you were trying to pull my leg," she explained. "I mean Cynthia, the psychic, the crystal gazer. Why, every one is going crazy over her. Do you mean to say you have n't been?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Jimmie.

"You may scoff, but she 's wonderful. Do you know she actually gave me the straight tip for the Derby? She did n't mean to, for she does n't lay herself out for that sort of thing — but she said, after telling me a lot of things about myself — things that had really happened — she was getting tired, I must tell you — 'I see something in your near future — it is a horse with a white star on its forehead — it has gone — I don't know what it means.' I went to the Derby. I had n't put a cent on, as I had been cleaned out at Cairo during the winter and had to retrench. The first horse that was led out had a white star on his forehead. None of the others had. It was St. Damien — a thirty to one chance. I backed him outright for £300. And now

I have £9000 to play with. Don't tell me there's nothing in Cynthia after that."

The knot of ladies dissolved. Jimmie put Norma's teacup down and went slowly back with her to the main room. He was feeling depressed, having lost his bearings in this unfamiliar world. Suddenly he halted.

"I wish you could pinch me," he said.

"Why?"

"To test whether I am awake. Have I really heard a sane and educated lady expressing her belief in the visions of a crystal-gazing adventuress?"

"You have. She believes firmly. So do heaps of women."

"I hope to heaven you don't!" he cried with a sudden intensity.

"What concern can my faith be to you?" she asked.

"I beg your pardon. No concern at all," he said apologetically. "But I generally blurt out what is in my mind."

"And what is in your mind? I am a person you can be quite frank with."

"I could n't bear the poem of your life to be sullied by all these vulgarities," said Jimmie.

"As I remarked to you the first evening I met you, Mr. Padgate," she said, holding out her hand by way of dismissal, "you are an astonishing person!"

The poem of her life! The phrase worried her before she slept that night. She shook the buzzing thing away from her impatiently. The poem of her life! The man was a fool.

Chapter III

A MODERN BETROTHAL

A YOUNG woman bred to a material view of the cosmos and self-trained to cynical expression of her opinions may thoroughly persuade herself that marriage is a social bargain in which it would be absurd for sentiment to have a place, and yet when the hour comes for deciding on so trivial an engagement, may find herself in an irritatingly unequable frame of mind. For Norma the hour had all but arrived. Morland King had asked to see her alone in view of an important conversation. She had made an appointment for ten o'clock, throwing over her evening's engagements. Her parents were entertaining a couple of friends in somebody else's box at the opera, and would return in time to save the important conversation from over-tediousness. She intended to amuse herself placidly with a novel until King's arrival.

This was a week or two after her encounter with Jimmie at the picture-gallery, since which occasion she had neither seen nor heard of him. He had faded from the surface of a consciousness kept on continued strain by the thousand incidents and faces of a London season. To Jimmie the series of meetings had been a phenomenon of infinite import. She had come like a queen of romance into his homely garden, and her radiance lingered, making the roses redder and the grass more green. But the queenly

apparition herself had other things to think about, and when she had grown angry and called him a fool, had dismissed him definitely from her mind. It was annoying therefore that on this particular evening the fool phrase should buzz again in her ears.

She threw down her book and went on to the balcony, where, on this close summer night, she could breathe a little cool air. A clock somewhere in the house chimed the half-hour. Morland was to come at ten. She longed for, yet dreaded, his coming; regretted that she had stayed away from the opera, where, after all, she could have observed the everlasting human comedy. She had dined early; the evening had been interminable; she felt nervous, and raged at her weakness. She was tired, out of harmony with herself, fretfully conscious too of the jarring notes in a room furnished by uneducated people of sudden wealth. The Wolff-Salamons, out of the kindness of their shrewd hearts, had offered the house for the season to the Hardacres, who had accepted the free quarters with profuse expressions of gratitude; which, however, did not prevent Mr. Hardacre from railing at the distance of the house (which was in Holland Park) from his club, or his wife from deprecating to her friends her temporary residence in what she was pleased to term the Ghetto. Nor did the Wolff-Salamons' generosity mitigate the effect of their furniture on Norma's nerves. When Jimmie's phrase came into her head with the suddenness of a mosquito, she could bear the room no longer.

She sat on the balcony and waited for Morland. There at least she was free from the flaring gold and blue, and the full-length portrait of the lady of the house, on which with delicate savagery the eminent painter had catalogued all

the shades of her ancestral vulgarity. Perhaps it was this portrait that had brought back the irony of Jimmie's tribute. The poem of her life! She sat with her chin on her palm, thinking bitterly of circumstance. She had never been happy, had grown to disbelieve in so absurd and animal a state. It had always been the same, as far back as she could remember. Her childhood: nurses and governesses — a swift succession of the latter till she began to regard them as remote from her inner life as the shop girl or railway guard with whom she came into casual contact. The life broken by visits abroad to fashionable watering or gambling places where she wandered lonely and proud, neglected by her parents, watching with keen eyes and imperturbable face the frivolities, the vices, the sordidnesses, taking them all in, speculating upon them, resolving some problems unaided and storing up others for future elucidation. Her year at the expensive finishing school in Paris where the smartest daughters of America babbled and chattered of money, money, till the air seemed unfit for woman to breathe unless it were saturated with gold dust. As hers was not, came discontent and overweening ambitions. Yet the purity was not all killed. She remembered her first large dinner-party. The same Lord Wyniard of the unclean scandal had taken her down. He was thirty years older than she, and an unsavoury reputation had reached even her young ears. The man regarded her with the leer of a satyr. She realised with a shudder for the first time the meaning of a phrase she had constantly met with in French novels — "*il la dévêtit de ses yeux.*" His manner was courtly, his air of breeding perfect; yet he managed to touch her fingers twice, and he sought to lead her on to dubious topics of conversation. She was frightened.

In the drawing-room, seeing him approach, she lost her head, took shelter with her mother, and trembling whispered to her, "Don't let that man come and talk to me again, mother, he 's a beast." She was bidden not to be a fool. The man had a title and twenty thousand a year, and she had evidently made an impression. A week afterwards her mother invited a bishop and his wife and Lord Wyniard to dinner, and Lord Wyniard took Norma down again. And that was her start in the world. She had followed the preordained course till now, with many adventures indeed by the way, but none that could justify the haunting phrase — the poem of her life!

Was the man such a fool, after all? Was it even ignorance on his part? Was it not, rather, wisdom on a lofty plane immeasurably above the commonplaces of ignorance and knowledge? The questions presented themselves to her vaguely. She was filled with a strange unrest, a craving for she knew not what. Yet she would shortly have in her grasp all — or nearly all — that she had aimed at in life. She counted the tale of her future possessions — houses, horses, diamonds, and the like. She seemed to have owned them a thousand years.

The clock in the house chimed ten in a pretentious musical way, which irritated her nerves. The silence after the last of the ten inexorable tinkles fell gratefully. Then she realised that in a minute or two Morland would arrive. Her heart began to beat, and she clasped her hands together in a nervous suspense of which she had not dreamed herself capable. A cab turned the corner of the street, approached with crescendo rattle, and stopped at the house. She saw Morland alight and reach up to pay the cabman. For a silly moment she had a wild impulse to cry to him over

the balcony to go away and leave her in peace. She waited until she heard the footman open the front door and admit him, then bracing herself, she entered the drawing-room, looked instinctively in a mirror, and sat down.

She met him cordially enough, returned his glance somewhat defiantly. The sight of him, florid, sleek, faultlessly attired, brought her back within the every-day sphere of dulled sensation. He held her hand long enough for him to say, after the first greeting:

"You can guess what I 've come for, can't you?"

"I suppose I do," she admitted in an off-hand way. "You will find frankness one of my vices. Won't you sit down?"

She motioned him to a chair, and seating herself on a sofa, prepared to listen.

"I 've come to ask you to marry me," said King.

"Well?" she asked, looking at him steadily.

"I want to know how it strikes you," he continued after a brief pause. "I think you know practically all that I can tell you about myself. I can give you what you want up to about fifteen thousand a year — it will be more when my mother dies. We're decent folk — old county family — I can offer you whatever society you like. You and I have tastes in common, care for the same things, same sort of people. I 'm sound in wind and limb — never had a day's illness in my life, so you would n't have to look after a cripple. And I 'd give the eyes out of my head to have you; you know that. How does it strike you?"

Norma had averted her glance from him towards the end of his speech, and leaning back was looking intently at her hands in her lap. For the moment she felt it impossible to reply. The words that had formulated them-

selves in her mind, "I think, Mr. King, the arrangement will be eminently advantageous to both parties," were too ludicrous in their adequacy to the situation. So she merely sat silent and motionless, regarding her manicured finger-nails, and awaiting another opening. King changed his seat to the sofa, by her side, and leaned forward.

"If you had been a simpler, more unsophisticated girl, Norma, I should have begun differently. I thought it would please you if I put sentiment aside."

Her head motioned acquiescence.

"But I 'm not going to put it aside," he went on. "It has got its place in the world, even when a man makes a proposal of marriage. And when I say I 'm in love with you, that I have been in love with you since the first time I saw you, it 's honest truth."

"Say you have a regard, a high regard, even," said Norma, still not looking at him, "and I 'll believe you."

"I 'm hanged if I will," said Morland. "I say I 'm in love with you."

Norma suddenly softened. The phrase tickled her ears again — this time pleasantly. The previous half-hour's groping in the dark of herself seemed to have resulted in discovery. She gave him a fleeting smile of mockery.

"Listen," she said. "If you will be contented with regard, a high regard, on my side, I will marry you. I really like you very much. Will that do?"

"It is all I ask now. The rest will come by and by."

"I 'm not so sure. We had better be perfectly frank with each other from the start, for we shall respect each other far more. Anyhow, if you treat me decently, as I am sure you will, you may be satisfied that I shall carry out my part of the bargain. My bosom friends tell one another

that I am worldly and heartless and all that — but I've never lied seriously or broken a promise in my life."

"Very well. Let us leave it at that," said Morland. "I suppose your people will have no objection?"

"None whatever," replied Norma, drily.

"When can I announce our engagement?"

"Whenever you like."

He took two or three reflective steps about the room and reseated himself on the sofa.

"Norma," he said softly, bending towards her, "I believe on such occasions there is a sort of privilege accorded to a fellow — may I?"

She glanced at him, hesitated, then proffered her cheek. He touched it with his lips.

The ceremony over, there ensued a few minutes of anticlimax. Norma breathed more freely. There had been no difficulties, no hypocrisies. The mild approach to rapture on Morland's part was perhaps, after all, only a matter of common decency, to be accepted by her as a convention of the *scène à faire*. So was the kiss. She broke the spell of awkwardness by rising, crossing the room, and turning off an electric pendant that illuminated the full-length portrait on the wall.

"We can't stand Mrs. Wolff-Salamon's congratulations so soon," she said with a laugh.

Conversation again became possible. They discussed arrangements. King suggested a marriage in the autumn. Norma, with a view to the prolongation of what appealed to her as a novel and desirable phase of existence — maidenhood relieved of the hateful duty of husband-hunting and unclouded by parental disapprobation — pleaded for delay till Christmas. She argued that in all human probability

the Parliamentary vacancy at Cosford, the safe seat on which Morland reckoned, would occur in the autumn, and he could not fix the date of an election at his own good pleasure. He must, besides, devote his entire energy to the business; time enough when it was over to think of such secondary matters as weddings, bridal tours, and the setting up of establishments.

"But you have to be considered, Norma," he said, half convinced.

"My dear Morland," she replied with a derisive lip, "I should never dream of coming between you and your public career."

He reflected a moment. "Why should we not get married at once?"

Norma laughed. "You are positively pastoral! No, my dear Morland, that 's what the passionate young lover always says to the coy maiden in the play, but if you will remember, it does n't seem to work even there. Besides, you must let me gratify my ambitions. When I was very young, I vowed I would marry an emperor. Then I toned him down into a prince. Later, becoming more practical, I dreamed of a peer. Finally I descended to a Member of Parliament. I can't marry you before you are a Member."

"You could have had dozens of 'em for the asking, I 'm sure," returned the prospective legislator with a grin. "Take them all round, they 're a shoddy lot."

He yielded eventually to Norma's proposal, alluding, however, with an air of ruefulness, to the infinite months of waiting he would have to endure. Tactfully she switched him off the line of sentiment to that of soberer politics. She put forward the platitude that a Parliamen-

tary life was one of great interest. Morland did not rise even to this level of enthusiasm.

"'Pon my soul, I really don't know why I'm going in for it. I promised old Potter years ago that I would come in when he gave up, and the people down there more or less took it for granted, the duchess included, and so without having thought much of it one way or the other, I find myself caught in a net. It will be a horrible bore. The whole of the session will be one dismal yawn. Never to be certain of sitting down to one's dinner in peace and comfort. Never to know when one will have to rush off at a moment's notice to take part in a confounded division. To have shoals of correspondence on subjects one knows nothing of and cares less for. It will be the life of a sweated tailor. And I, of all people, who like to take things easy! I'm not quite sure whether I'm an idiot or a hero."

He ended in a short laugh and leaned against the mantelpiece, his hands in his pockets.

"It would be the sweet and pretty thing for me to say," remarked Norma, "that in my eyes you will always be heroic."

"Well, 'pon my soul, I shall be. We'll see precious little of one another."

"We'll have all the more chance of prolonging our illusions," she replied.

On the whole, however, her conduct towards him was irreproachable. The thaw from her usual iciness to this comparatively harmless raillery flattered the lover's self-esteem. Woman-wise, as every man in the profundity of his vain heart believes himself to be, he not only attributed the change to his own powers of seduction, but interpreted

it as significant of a yet greater transformation. A man of Morland's type is seldom afflicted with a morbid subtlety of perception; and when he has gained for his own personal use and adornment a woman of singular distinction, he may be readily pardoned for a slight attack of fatuity.

The idyllic hour was brought to a close by the return of Norma's parents. As Norma, shrinking from the vulgarity of the prearranged scene and intolerable maternal coaching in her part, had not informed them of her appointment with Morland, alleging as an excuse for not going to the opera a disinclination to be bored to tears by *Aida*, they were mildly surprised by his presence in the house at so late an hour. In a few words he acquainted them with what had taken place. He formally asked their consent. Mr. Hardacre wrung his hand fervently. Mrs. Hardacre's steel-grey eyes glittered welcome into her family. She turned to her dear child and expressed her heartfelt joy. Norma, submissive to conventional decencies, suffered herself to be kissed. Mother and daughter had given up kissing as a habit for some years past, though they practised it occasionally before strangers. Mr. Hardacre put his arm around her in a diffident way and patted her back, murmuring incoherent wishes for her happiness. Everything to be said and done was effected in a perfectly well-bred manner. Norma spoke very little, regarding the proceedings with an impersonal air of satiric interest. At last Mr. Hardacre suggested to Morland a chat over whisky and soda and a cigar in the library. In unsophisticated circles it is not unusual at such a conjuncture for a girl's friends and relations to afford the lovers some unblushing opportunity of bidding each other a private farewell. Norma, anticipating any such possible though

improbable departure from sanity on the part of her parents, made good her escape after shaking hands in an ordinary way with Morland. Mrs. Hardacre followed her upstairs, eager to learn details, which were eventually given with some acidity by her daughter, and the two men retired below.

"My boy," said Mr. Hardacre, as they parted an hour afterwards, "you will find that Norma has had the training that will make her a damned fine woman."

Chapter IV

THE GREAT FROCK EPISODE

JIMMIE PADGATE was the son of a retired commander in the Navy, of irreproachable birth and breeding, of a breezy impulsive disposition, and with a pretty talent as an amateur actor. Finding idleness the root of all boredom, he took to the stage, and during the first week of his first provincial tour fell in love with the leading lady, a fragile waif of a woman of vague upbringing. That so delicate a creature should have to face the miseries of a touring life — the comfortless lodgings, the ill-cooked food, the damp death-traps of dressing-rooms, the long circuitous Sunday train-journeys — roused him to furious indignation. He married her right away, took her incontinently from things theatrical, and found congenial occupation in adoring her. But the hapless lady survived her marriage only long enough to see Jimmie safe into short frocks, and then fell sick and died. The impulsive sailor educated the boy in his own fashion for a dozen years or so, and then he, in his turn, died, leaving his son a small inheritance to be administered by his only brother, an easy-going bachelor in a Government office. This inheritance sufficed to send Jimmie to Harrow, where he began his life-long friendship with Morland King, and to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he learned many useful things beside the method of paint-

ing pictures. When he returned to London, his uncle handed him over the hundred or two that remained, and, his duty being accomplished, fell over a precipice in the Alps, and concerned himself no more about his nephew. Then Jimmie set to work to earn his living.

When he snatched the child Aline from the embraces of her tipsy aunt and carried her out into the street, wondering what in the world he should do with her, he was just under thirty years of age. How he had earned a livelihood till then and kept himself free from debt he scarcely knew. When he obtained a fair price for a picture, he deposited a lump sum with his landlord in respect of rent in advance, another sum with the keeper of the little restaurant where he ate his meals, and frittered the rest away among his necessitous friends. In the long intervals between sales, he either went about penniless or provided himself with pocket money by black and white or other odd work that comes in the young artist's way. His residence at that time consisted in a studio and a bedroom in Camden Town. His wants were few, his hopes were many. He loved his art, he loved the world. His optimistic temperament brought him smiles from all those with whom he came in contact — even from dealers, when he wasted their time in expounding to them the commercial value of an unmarketable picture. He was quite happy, quite irresponsible. When soberer friends reproached him for his hand-to-mouth way of living, he argued that if he scraped to-day he would probably spread the butter thick to-morrow, thus securing the average, the golden mean, which was the ideal of their respectability. As for success, that elusive will-o'-the-wisp, the man who did not enjoy the humour of failure never deserved to succeed.

But when he had rescued Aline from the limbo over the small apothecary's shop, as thoughtlessly and as gallantly as his father before him had rescued the delicate lady from the trials of theatrical vagabondage, he found himself face to face with a perplexing problem. That first night he had risen from an amorphous bed he had arranged for himself on the studio floor, and entered his own bedroom on tiptoe, and looked with pathetic helplessness on the tiny child asleep beneath his bedclothes. If it had been a boy, he would have had no particular puzzle. A boy could have been stowed in a corner of the studio, where he could have learned manners and the fear of God and the way of smiling at adversity. He would have profited enormously, as Jimmie felt assured, by his education. But with a girl it was vastly different. An endless vista of shadowy, dreamy, delicate possibilities perplexed him. He conceived women as beings ethereal, with a range of exquisite emotions denied to masculine coarseness. Even the Rue Bonaparte had not destroyed his illusion, and he still attributed to the fair Mænads of the Bal des Quatre-z' Arts the lingering fragrance of the original Psyche. Of course Jimmie was a fool, as ten years afterwards Norma had decided; but this view of himself not occurring to him, he had to manage according to his lights. Here was this mysterious embryo goddess entirely dependent on him. No corner of the studio and rough-and-tumble discipline for her. She must sleep on down and be covered with silk; the airs of heaven must not visit her cheek too roughly; the clatter of the brazen world must not be allowed to deafen her to her own sweet inner harmonies. Jimmie was sorely perplexed.

His charwoman next morning could throw no light on

the riddle. She had seven children of her own, four of them girls, and they had to get along the best way they could. She was of opinion that if let alone and just physicked when she had any complaint, Aline would grow up of her own accord. Jimmie said that this possibility had not struck him, but doubtless the lady was right. Could she tell him how many times a day a little girl ought to be fed and what she was to eat? The charwoman's draft upon her own family experiences enlightened Jimmie so far that he put a sovereign into her hand to provide a dinner for her children. After that he consulted her no more. It was an expensive process.

Meanwhile it was obvious that a studio and one bedroom would not be sufficient accommodation, and Jimmie, greatly daring, took a house. He also engaged a resident housekeeper for himself and a respectable cat for Aline, and when he had settled down, after having spent every penny he could scrape together on furniture, began to wonder how he could pay the rent. A month or two before he would have as soon thought of buying a palace in Park Lane as renting a house in St. John's Wood — a cheap, shabby little house, it is true; but still a house, with drawing-room, dining-room, bedrooms, and a studio built over the space where once the garden tried to smile. He wandered through it with a wonderment quite as childish as that of Aline, who had helped him to buy the furniture. But how was he ever going to pay the rent?

After a time he ceased asking the question. The ravens that fed Elijah provided him with the twenty quarterly pieces of gold. Picture-dealers of every hue and grade supplied him with the wherewithal to live. In those early days he penetrated most of the murky byways of his art — alleys

he would have passed by with pinched nose a year before, when an empty pocket and an empty stomach concerned himself alone. Now, when the money for the last picture had gone, and no more was forthcoming by way of advance on royalties on plates, and the black and white market was congested, he did amazing things. He copied old Masters for a red-faced, beery print-seller in Frith Street, who found some mysterious market for them. The price can be gauged by the fact that years afterwards Jimmie recognised one of his own copies in an auction room, and heard it knocked down as a genuine Velasquez for eleven shillings and sixpence. He also painted oil landscapes for a dealer who did an immense trade in this line, selling them to drapers and fancy-warehousemen, who in their turn retailed them to an art-loving public, framed in gold, at one and eleven pence three farthings; and the artist's rate of payment was five shillings a dozen — panels supplied, but not the paint. To see Jimmie attack these was the child Aline's delight. In after years she wept in a foolish way over the memory. He would do half a dozen at a time: first dash in the foregrounds, either meadows or stretches of shore, then wash in bold, stormy skies, then a bit of water, smooth or rugged according as it was meant to represent pool or sea; then a few vigorous strokes would put in a ship and a lighthouse on one panel, a tree and a cow on a second, a woman and a cottage on a third. And all the time, as he worked at lightning speed, he would laugh and joke with the child, who sat fascinated by the magic with which each mysterious mass of daubs and smudges grew into a living picture under his hand. When his invention was at a loss, he would call upon her to suggest accessories; and if she cried out "windmill," suddenly there would spring from

under the darting brush-point a mill with flapping sails against the sky. Now and again in his hurry Jimmie would make a mistake, and Aline would shriek with delight:

"Why, Jimmie, that's a cow!"

And sure enough, horned and uddered, and with casual tail, a cow was wandering over the ocean, mildly speculating on the lighthouse. Then Jimmie would roar with laughter, and he would tether the cow to a buoy and put in a milkmaid in a boat coming to milk the cow, and at Aline's breathless suggestion, a robber with a bow and arrow shooting the unnatural animal from the lighthouse top. Thus he would waste an hour elaborating the absurdity, finishing it off beautifully so that it should be worthy of a place on Aline's bedroom wall.

The months and years passed, and Jimmie found himself, if not on the highroad to fortune, at least relieved of the necessity of frequenting the murky byways aforesaid. He even acquired a little reputation as a portrait painter, much to his conscientious but comical despair. "I am taking people's money under false pretences," he would say. "I am an imaginative painter. I can't do portraits. Your real portrait painter can jerk the very soul out of a man and splash it on to his face. I can't. Why do they come to me to be photographed, when Brown, Jones, or Robinson would give them a portrait? Why can't they buy my subject-pictures which are good? In taking their money I am a mercenary, unscrupulous villain!" Indeed, if Aline had not been there to keep him within the bounds of sanity, his Quixotism might have led him to send his clients to Brown or Jones, where they could get better value for their money. But Aline was there, rising gradu-

ally from the little child into girlhood, and growing in grace day by day. After all, the charwoman seemed to be right. The tender plant, left to itself, thrived, shot up apparently of its own accord, much to Jimmie's mystification. It never occurred to him that he was the all in all of her training — her mother, father, nurse, teacher, counsellor, example. Everything she was susceptible of being taught by a human being, he taught her — from the common rudiments when she was a little child to the deeper things of literature and history when she was a ripening maiden. Her life was bound up with his. Her mind took the prevailing colour of his mind as inevitably as the grasshopper takes the green of grass or the locust the grey-brown of the sand. But Jimmie in his simple way regarded the girl's sweet development as a miracle of spontaneous growth.

Yet Aline on her part instinctively appreciated the child in Jimmie, and from very early years assumed a quaint attitude of protection in common every-day matters. From the age of twelve she knew the exact state of his financial affairs, and gravely deliberated with him over items of special expenditure; and when she was fourteen she profited by a change in housekeepers to take upon herself the charge of the household. Her unlimited knowledge of domestic science was another thing that astounded Jimmie, who to the end of his days would have cheerfully given two shillings a pound for potatoes. And thus, while adoring Jimmie and conscious that she owed him the quickening of the soul within her, she became undisputed mistress of her small material domain, and regarded him as a kind of godlike baby.

At last there came a memorable day. According to a

custom five or six years old, Jimmie and Aline were to spend New Year's Eve with some friends, the Frewen-Smiths. He was a rising architect who had lately won two or three important competitions and had gradually been extending his scale of living. The New Year's Eve party was to be a much more elaborate affair than usual. Aline had received a beautifully printed card of invitation, with "Dancing" in the corner. She looked through her slender wardrobe. Not a frock could she find equal to such a festival. And as she gazed wistfully at the simple child's finery laid out upon her bed, a desire that had dawned vaguely some time before and had week by week broadened into craving, burst into the full blaze of a necessity. She sat down on her bed and puckered her young brows, considering the matter in all its aspects. Then, with her sex's guilelessness, she went down to the studio, where Jimmie was painting, and put her arms round his neck. Did he think she could get a new frock for Mrs. Frewen-Smith's party?

"My dear child," said Jimmie in astonishment, "what an idiotic question!"

"But I want really a nice one," said Aline, coaxingly.

"Then get one, dear," said Jimmie, swinging round on his stool, so as to look at her.

"But I'd like you to give me this one as a present. I don't want it to be like the others that I help myself to and you know nothing about — although they all are presents, if it comes to that — I want you to give me this one specially."

Jimmie laid down palette and mahl-stick and brush, and from a letter-case in his pocket drew out three five-pound notes.

"Will this buy one?"

The girl's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, you are silly, Jimmie," she cried. "A quarter of it will do."

She took one of the notes, kissed him, and ran out of the studio, leaving Jimmie wondering why the female sex were so prone to weeping. The next day he saw a strange woman established at the dining-room table. He learned that it was a dressmaker. For the next week an air of mystery hung over the place. The girl, in her neat short frock and with her soft brown hair tied with a ribbon, went about her household duties as usual; but there was a subdued light in her eyes that Jimmie noticed, but could not understand. Occasionally he enquired about the new frock. It was progressing famously, said Aline. It was going to be a most beautiful frock. He would have seen nothing like it since he was born.

"Vanity, thy name is little girls," he laughed, pinching her chin.

On the evening of the 31st of December Jimmie, in his well-worn evening suit, came down to the dining-room, and for the first time in his life waited for Aline. He sat down by the fire with a book. The cab that had been ordered drew up outside. It was a remarkable thing for Aline to be late. After a while the door opened, and a voice said, "I am ready." Jimmie rose, turned round, and for a moment stared stupidly at the sight that met his eyes. It was Aline certainly, but a new Aline, quite a different Aline from the little girl he had known hitherto. Her brown hair was done up in a mysterious manner on the top of her head, and the tip of a silver-mounted tortoise-shell comb (a present, she afterwards confessed, from Constance Deering, who was in her secret) peeped coquettishly from

the coils. The fashionably-cut white evening dress showed her neck and shoulders and pretty round arms, and displayed in a manner that was a revelation the delicate curves of her young figure. A little gold locket that Jimmie had given her rose and fell on her bosom. She met his stare in laughing, blushing defiance, and whisked round so as to present a side view of the costume. The astonishing thing had a train.

"God bless my soul!" cried Jimmie. "It never entered my head!"

"What?"

"That you're a young woman, that you're grown up, that we'll have all the young men in the place falling in love with you, that you'll be getting married, and that I'm becoming a decrepit old fogey. Well, God bless my soul!"

She came up and put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him.

"You think it becoming, don't you, Jimmie?"

"Becoming! Why, it's ravishing! It's irresistible! Do you mean to say that you got all that, gloves and shoes and everything, out of a five-pound note?"

She nodded.

"Good Lord!" said Jimmie in astonishment.

In this manner came realisation of the fact that the tiny child he had undressed and put to sleep in his own bed ten years before had grown into a woman. The shock brought back some of the old perplexities, and created for a short while an odd shyness in his dealings with her. He treated her deferentially, regarded apologetically the mean viands on which he forced this fresh-winged goddess to dine, went out and wasted his money on adornments befitting her

rank, and behaved with such pathetic foolishness that Aline, crying and laughing, threatened to run away and earn her living as a nursery-maid if he did not amend his conduct. Whereupon there was a very touching scene, and Jimmie's undertaking to revert to his previous brutality put their relations once more on a sound basis; but all the same there stole into Jimmie's environment a subtle grace which the sensitive in him was quick to perceive. Its fragrance revived the tender grace of a departed day, before he had taken Aline — a day that had ended in a woeful flight to Paris, where he had arrived just in time to follow through the streets a poor little funeral procession to a poor little grave-side in the cemetery of Bagneux. Her name was Sidonie Bourdain, and she was a good girl and had loved Jimmie with all her heart.

The tender grace was that of March violets. The essence of a maid's springtide diffused itself through the house, and springtide began to bud again in the man's breast. It was a strange hyperphysical transfusion of quickening sap. His jesting pictured himself as of a sudden grown hoary, the potential father of a full-blown woman, two or three years short of grandfatherdom. But these were words thrown off from the very lightness of a mood, and vanishing like bubbles in the air. Deep down worked the craving of the man still young for love and romance and the sweet message in a woman's eyes. It was a gentle madness — utterly unsuspected by its victim — but a madness such as the god first inflicts upon him whom he desires to drive to love's destruction. In the middle of it all, while Aline and himself were finding a tentative footing on the newly established basis of their

relationship, the ironical deity took him by the hand and led him into the cold and queenly presence of Norma Hardacre.

After that Jimmie fell back into his old ways with Aline, and the Great Frock Episode was closed.

Chapter V

A BROKEN BUTTERFLY

ALINE sat in the studio, the picture of housewifely concern, mending Jimmie's socks. It was not the unoffending garments that brought the expression into her face, but her glance at the old Dutch clock — so old and crotchety that unless it were tilted to one side it would not consent to go — whose hands had come with an asthmatic whir to the hour of eleven. And Jimmie had not yet come down to breakfast. She had called him an hour ago. His cheery response had been her sanction for putting the meal into preparation, and now the bacon would be uneatable. She sighed. Taking care of Jimmie was no light responsibility. Not that he would complain; far from it. He would eat the bacon raw or calcined if she set it before him. But that would not be for his good, and hence the responsibility. In slipping from her grasp and doing the things he ought not to do, he was an eel or a twelve-year-old schoolboy. Last night, for instance, instead of finishing off some urgent work for an art periodical, he had assured her in his superlative manner that it was of no consequence, and had wasted his evening with her at the Earl's Court Exhibition. It had been warm and lovely, and the band and the bright crowd had set her young pulses throbbing, and they had sat at a little table, and Jimmie had given her some celestial liquid which she had sucked through a straw, and altogether, to use her own

unsophisticated dialect, it had been perfectly heavenly. But it was wrong of Jimmie to have sacrificed himself for her pleasure, and to have deceived her into accepting it. For at three or four o'clock she had heard him tiptoeing softly past her door on his way to bed, and the finished work she had found on his table this morning betrayed his occupation. Even the consolation of scolding him for oversleep and a spoiled breakfast was thus denied. She spread out her hand in the sock so as to gauge the extent of a hole, and, contemplating it, sighed again.

The studio was a vast room distempered in bluish grey, and Aline, sitting solitary at the far end, in the line of a broad quivering beam of light that streamed through a lofty window running the whole width of the north-east side, looked like a little brown saint in a bare conventual hall. For an ascetic simplicity was the studio's key-note. No curtains, draperies, screens, Japaneseries, no artistic scheme of decoration, no rare toys of furniture filled the place with luxurious inspiration. Here and there about the walls hung a sketch by a brother artist; of his own unsold pictures and studies some were hung, others stacked together on the floor. An old, rusty, leather drawing-room suite distributed about the studio afforded sitting accommodation. There was the big easel bearing the subject-picture on which he now was at work, with a smaller easel carrying the study by its side. On the model-stand a draped lay figure sprawled grotesquely. A long deal table was the untidy home of piles of papers, books, colours, brushes, artistic properties. A smaller table at the end where Aline sat was laid for breakfast. It was one of Jimmie's eccentricities to breakfast in the studio. The dining-room for dinner — he yielded to the convention; for lunch, perhaps;

for breakfast, no. All his intimate life had been passed in the studio; the prim little drawing-room he scarcely entered half-a-dozen times in the year.

Aline was contemplating the hole in the sock when the door opened. She sprang to her feet, advanced a step, and then halted with a little exclamation.

"Oh, it 's you!"

"Yes. Are you disappointed?" asked the smiling youth who had appeared instead of the expected Jimmie.

"I can get over it. How are you, Tony?"

Mr. Anthony Merewether gave her the superfluous assurance that he was in good health. He had the pleasant boyish face and clean-limbed figure of the young Englishman upon whom cares sit lightly. Aline resumed her work demurely. The young man seated himself near by.

"How is Jimmie?"

"Whom are you calling 'Jimmie'?" asked Aline. "Mr. Padgate, if you please."

"You call him Jimmie."

"I 've called him so ever since I could speak. I think it was one of the first three words I learned. When you can say the same, you can call him Jimmie."

"Well, how is Mr. Padgate?" the snubbed youth asked with due humility.

"You can never tell how a man is before breakfast. Why are n't you at work?"

He bowed to her sagacity, and in answer to her question explained the purport of his visit. He was going to spend the day sketching up the river. Would she put on her hat and come with him?

"A fine lot of sketching you 'd do, if I did," said Aline.

The young man vowed with fervour that as soon as he

had settled down to a view he would work furiously and would not exchange a remark with her.

"Which would be very amusing for me," retorted Aline. "No, I can't come. I'm far too busy. I've got to hunt up a model for the new picture."

Tony leant back in his chair, dispirited, and began to protest. She laughed at his woeful face, and half yielding, questioned him about trains. He overwhelmed her with a rush of figures, then paused to give her time to recover. His eyes wandered to the breakfast-table, where lay Jimmie's unopened correspondence. One letter lay apart from the others. Tony took it up idly.

"Here's a letter come to the wrong house."

"No; it is quite right," said Aline.

"Who is David Rendell, Esquire?"

"Mr. Rendell is a friend of Jimmie's, I believe."

"I have never heard of him. What's he like?"

"I don't know. Jimmie never speaks of him," replied Aline.

"That's odd."

The young man threw the letter on the table and returned to the subject of the outing. She must accompany him. He felt a perfect watercolour working itself up within him. One of those dreamy bits of backwater. He had a title for it already, "The Heart of Summer." The difference her presence in the punt would make to the picture would be that between life and deadness.

The girl fluttered a shy, pleased glance at him. But she loved to tease; besides, had she not but lately awakened to the sweet novelty of her young womanhood?

"Perhaps Jimmie won't let me go."

Tony sprang to his feet. "Jimmie won't let you go!"

he exclaimed in indignant echo. "Did he ever deny you a pleasure since you were born?"

Her eyes sparkled at his tribute to the adored one's excellences. "That 's just where it is, you see, Tony. His very goodness to me won't let me do things sometimes."

The servant hurried in with the breakfast-tray and the news that the master was coming down. Aline anxiously inspected the bacon. To her relief it was freshly cooked. In a minute or two a voice humming an air was heard outside, and Jimmie entered, smilingly content with existence.

"Hallo, Tony, what are you doing here, wasting the morning light? Have some breakfast? Why have n't you laid a place for him?"

Tony declined the invitation, and explained his presence. Jimmie rubbed his hands.

"A day on the river! The very thing for Aline. It will do her good."

"I did n't say I was going, Jimmie."

"Not going? Rubbish. Put on your things and be off at once."

"How can I until I have given you your breakfast? And then there 's the model — you would never be able to engage her by yourself. And you must have her to-morrow."

"I know I 'm helpless, dear, but I can engage a model."

"And waste your time. Besides, you won't be able to find the address."

"There are cab-horses, dear, with unerring instinct."

"Your breakfast is getting cold, Jimmie," said Aline, not condescending to notice the outrage of her economic principles.

Eventually Jimmie had his way. Tony Merewether

was summarily dismissed, but bidden to return in an hour's time, when Aline would be graciously pleased to be ready. She poured out Jimmie's coffee, and sat at the side of the table, watching him eat. He turned to his letters, picked up the one addressed to "David Rendell." Aline noticed a shade of displeasure cross his face.

"Who is Mr. Rendell, Jimmie?" asked Aline.

"A man I know, dear," he replied, putting the envelope in his pocket. He went on with his breakfast meditatively for a few moments, then opened his other letters. He threw a couple of bills across the table. His face had regained its serenity.

"See that these ill-mannered people are paid, Aline."

"What with, dear?"

"Money, my child, money. What!" he exclaimed, noting a familiar expression on her face. "Are we running short? Send them telegrams to say we 'll pay next week. Something is bound to come in by then."

"Mrs. Bullingdon ought to send the cheque for her portrait," said Aline.

"Of course she will. And there 's something due from Hyam. What a thing it is to have great expectations! Here 's one from Renshaw," he said, opening another letter. "'Dear Padgate' — Dear Padgate!" He put his hands on the table and looked across at Aline. "Now, what on earth can I have done to offend him? I 've been 'Dear Jimmie' for the last twelve years."

Aline shook her young head pityingly. "Don't you know yet that it is always 'Dear Padgate' when they want to borrow money of you?"

Jimmie glanced at the letter and then across the table again.

"Dear me," he said thoughtfully. "Your knowledge of the world at your tender age is surprising. He does want money. Poor old chap! It is really quite touching. 'For the love of God lend me four pounds ten to carry me on to the end of the quarter.'"

"That's two months off. Mr. Renshaw will have to be more economical than usual," said Aline, drily. "I am afraid he drinks dreadfully, Jimmie."

"Hush, dear!" he said, becoming grave. "A man's infirmities are his infirmities, and we are not called upon to be his judges. How much have we in the house altogether?" he asked with a sudden return to his bright manner.

"Ten pounds three and sixpence."

"Why, that's a fortune. Of course we can help Renshaw. Wire him his four pounds ten when you go out."

"But, Jimmie —" expostulated this royal person's minister of finance.

"Do what I say, my dear," said Jimmie, quietly.

That note in his voice always brought about instant submission, fetched her down from heights of pitying protection to the prostrate humility of a little girl saying "Yes, Jimmie," as to a directing providence. She did not know from which of the two positions, the height or the depth, she loved him the more. As a matter of fact, the two ranges of emotion were perfect complements one of the other, the sex in her finding satisfaction of its two imperious cravings, to shelter and to worship.

The Renshaw incident was closed, locked up as it were in her heart by the little snap of the "Yes, Jimmie." One or two other letters were discussed gaily. The last to be opened was a note from Mrs. Deering. "Come to lunch on Sunday and bring Aline. I am asking your friend

Norma Hardacre." Aline clapped her hands. She had been longing to see that beautiful Miss Hardacre again. Of course Jimmie would go? He smiled.

"Another unconscious sitting for the portrait," he said. His glance wandered to a strainer that stood with its face to the wall, at a further end of the room, and he became absent-minded. Lately he had been dreaming a boy's shadowy dreams, too sweet as yet for him to seek to give them form in his waking hours. A warm touch on his hand brought him back to diurnal things. It was the coffee-pot held by Aline.

"I have asked you twice if you would have more coffee," she laughed.

"I suppose I 'm the happiest being in existence," he said irrelevantly.

Aline poured out the coffee. "You have n't got much to make you happy, poor dear!" she remarked, when the operation was concluded.

His retort was checked by a violent peal at the front door-bell and a thundering knock.

"That 's Morland," cried Jimmie. "He is like the day of doom — always heralds his approach by an earthquake."

Morland it was, in riding tweeds, a whip in his hand. He pointed an upbraiding finger at the half-eaten breakfast. The sloth of these painters! Aline flew to the loved one's protection. Jimmie had not gone to bed till four. The poor dear had to sleep.

"I did n't get to bed till four, either," said Morland, with the healthy, sport-loving man's contempt for people who require sleep, "but I was up at eight and was riding in the Park at nine. Then I thought I 'd come up here. I 've got some news for you."

Aline escaped. Morland's air of health and prosperity overpowered her. She did not dare whisper detraction of him to Jimmie, in whose eyes he was incomparable, but to Tony Merewether she had made known her wish that he did not look always so provokingly clean, so eternally satisfied with himself. All the colour of his mind had gone into his face, was her uncharitable epigram. Aline, it will be observed, saw no advantage in a tongue perpetually tipped with honey.

"What is your news?" asked Jimmie, as soon as they were alone.

"I have done it at last," said Morland.

"What?"

"Proposed. I 'm engaged. I 'm going to be married."

Jimmie's honest face beamed pleasure. He wrung Morland's hand. The best news he had heard for a long time. When had he taken the plunge into the pool of happiness?

"Last night."

"And you have come straight to tell me? It is like you. I am touched. It is good to know you carry me in your heart like that."

Morland laughed. "My dear old Jimmie —"

"I am so glad. I never suspected anything of the kind. Well, she 's an amazingly lucky young woman whoever she is. When can I have a timid peep at the divinity?"

"Whenever you like — why, don't you know who it is?"

"Lord, no, man; how should I?"

"It 's Norma Hardacre."

"Norma Hardacre!" The echo came from Jimmie as from a hollow cave, and was followed by a silence no less

cavernous. The world was suddenly reduced to an empty shell, black, meaningless.

"Yes," said Morland, with a short laugh. He carefully selected, cut, and lit a cigar, then turned his back and examined the half-finished picture. He felt the Briton's shamefacedness in the novelty of the position of affianced lover. The echo that in Jimmie's ears had sounded so forlorn was to him a mere exclamation of surprise. His solicitude as to the cigar and his inspection of the picture saved him by lucky chance from seeing Jimmie's face, which wore the blank, piteous look of a child that has had its most cherished possession snatched out of its hand and thrown into the fire. Such episodes in life cannot be measured by time as it is reckoned in the physical universe. To Jimmie, standing amid the chaos of his dreams, indefinite hours seemed to have passed since he had spoken. For indefinite hours he seemed to grope towards reconstruction. He lived intensely in the soul's realm, where time is not, was swept through infinite phases of emotion; finally awoke to a consciousness of renunciation, full and generous. Perhaps a minute and a half had elapsed. He crossed swiftly to Morland and clapped him on the shoulder.

"The woman among all women I could have wished for you."

His voice quavered a little; but Morland, turning round, saw nothing in Jimmie's eyes but the honest gladness he had taken for granted he should find there. The earnest scrutiny he missed. He laughed again.

"There are not many in London to touch her," he said in his self-satisfied way.

"Is there one?"

"You seem more royalist than — well, than Morland King," said the happy lover, chuckling at his joke. "I wish I had the artist's command of superlatives as you have, Jimmie. It would come in deuced handy sometimes. Now if, for instance, you wanted to describe the reddest thing that ever was, you would find some hyperbolic image for it, whereas I could only say it was damned red. See what I mean?"

"It does n't matter what you say, but what you feel," said Jimmie. "Perhaps we hyperbolic people fritter away emotions in the mere frenzy of expressing them. The mute man often has deeper feelings."

"Oh, I 'm not going to set up as an unerupted volcano," laughed Morland. "I 'm only the average man that has got the girl he has set his heart on — and of course I think her in many ways a paragon, otherwise I should n't have set my heart on her. There are plenty to pick from, God knows. And they let you know it too, by Jove. You 're lucky enough to live out of what is called Society, so you can't realise how they shy themselves at you. Sometimes one has to be simply a brute and dump 'em down hard. That 's what I liked about Norma Hardacre. She required no dumping."

"I should think not," said Jimmie.

"There 's one thing that pleases me immensely," Morland remarked, "and that is the fancy she has taken for you. It 's genuine. I 've never heard her talk of any one else as she does of you. She is not given to gush, as you may have observed."

"It 's a very deep pleasure to me to hear it," said Jimmie, looking bravely in the eyes of the happy man. "My opinion of Miss Hardacre I have told you already."

Morland waved his cigar as a sign of acceptance of the tribute to the lady.

"I was thinking of myself," he said. "There are a good many men I shall have to drop more or less when I 'm married. Norma would n't have 'em in the house. There are others that will have to be on probation. Now I should n't have liked you to be on probation — to run the risk of my wife not approving of you — caring to see you — you know what I mean. But you 're different from anybody else, Jimmie. I 'm not given to talking sentiment — but we 've grown up together — and somehow, in spite of our being thrown in different worlds, you have got to be a part of my life. There!" he concluded with a sigh of relief, putting on his hat and holding out his hand, "I 've said it!"

The brightening of Jimmie's eyes gave token of a heart keenly touched. Deeply rooted indeed must be the affection that could have impelled Morland to so unusual a demonstration of feeling. His nature was as responsive as a harp set in the wind. His counterpart in woman would have felt the tears well into her eyes. A man is allowed but a breath, a moisture, that makes the eyes bright. Morland had said the final word of sentiment; equally, utterly true of himself. Morland was equally a part of his life. It were folly to discuss the reasons. Loyal friendships between men are often the divinest of paradoxes.

The touch upon Jimmie's heart was magnetic. It soothed pain. It set free a flood of generous emotion, even thanksgiving that he was thus allowed vicarious joy in infinite perfections. It was vouchsafed him to be happy in the happiness of two dear to him. This much he said

to Morland, with what intensity of meaning the fortunate lover was a myriad leagues from suspecting.

"I 'll see you safely mounted," said Jimmie, opening the studio door. Then suddenly like a cold wind a memory buffeted him. He shut the door again.

"I forgot. I have a letter for you. It came this morning."

Morland took the letter addressed to "David Rendell" which Jimmie drew from his pocket, and uttered an angry exclamation.

"I thought this infernal business was over and done with."

He tore open the envelope, read the contents, then tilted his hat to the back of his head, and sitting down on one of the dilapidated straight-backed chairs of the leather suite, looked at Jimmie in great perplexity. In justice to the man it must be said that anger had vanished.

"I suppose you know what these letters mean that you have been taking in for me?"

"I have never permitted myself to speculate," said Jimmie. "You asked me to do you a very great service. It was a little one. You are not a man to do anything dishonourable. I concluded you had your reasons, which it would have been impertinent of me to inquire into."

It 's the usual thing," said Morland, with a self-incriminatory shrug. "A girl."

"A love affair was obvious."

Morland spat out an exclamation of impatient disgust for himself and rose to his feet.

"Heaven knows how it began — she was poor and lonely — almost a lady — and she had beauty and manners and that sort of thing above her class."

"They always have," said Jimmie, with a pained expression. "You need n't tell me the story. It 's about the miserablest on God's earth, is n't it now?"

"I suppose so. Upon my soul, I 'm not a beast, Jimmie!"

The unwonted rarefied air of sentiment that he had been breathing for the last twelve hours had, as it were, intoxicated him. Had the letter reached him the day before, he would have left the story connected with it in the cold-storage depository where men are wont to keep such things. No one would have dreamed of its existence. But now he felt an exaggerated remorse, a craving for confession, and yet he made the naked remorseful human's instinctive clutch at palliatives.

"Upon my soul, I 'm not a beast, Jimmie. I swear I loved her at first. You know what it is. You yourself loved a little girl in Paris — you told me about it — did n't you?"

Jimmie set his teeth, and said, "Yes."

Morland went on.

"Some women have ways with them, you know. They turn you into one of those toy thermometers — you hold the bulb, and the spirit in it rises and bubbles. She got hold of me that way — I bubbled, I suppose — it was n't her fault, she was sweet and innocent. It was her nature. You artistic people call the damned thing a temperament, I believe. Anyhow I was in earnest at the beginning. Then — one always does — I found it was only a passing fancy."

"And like a passing cab it has splashed you with mud. How does the matter stand now?"

"Read this," said Morland, handing him the letter.

"Dearest," it ran, "the time is coming when you can

be very good to me. Jenny." That was all. Jimmie, holding the paper in front of him, looked up distressfully at Morland.

"'The time is coming when you can be very good to me.' How confoundedly pathetic! Poor little girl! Oh, damn it, Morland, you are going to be good to her, are n't you?"

"I 'll do all I can. Of course I 'll do all I can. I tell you I 'm not a beast. Heaps of other men would n't care a hang about it. They would tell her to go to the devil. I 'm not that sort."

"I know you 're not," said Jimmie.

Morland lit another cigar with the air of a man whose virtues deserve some reward.

"The letter can only have one interpretation. Have you known of it?"

"Never dreamed of it."

"Was there any question of marriage?"

"None whatever. Difference of position and all the rest of it. She quite understood. In fact, it was like your Quartier Latin affair."

Jimmie winced. "It was n't the Quartier Latin — and I was going to marry her — only she died before — oh, don't mind me, Morland. What 's going to be done now?"

Morland shrugged his shoulders again, having palliated himself into a more normal condition. His conscience, to speak by the book, was clothed and in its right mind.

"It 's infernally hard lines it should come just at this time. You see, I 've heaps of things to think about. My position — Parliament — I 'm going to contest Cosford in the autumn. If the constituency gets hold of any scandal, I 'm ruined. You know the Alpine heights of morality of

a British constituency — and there's always some moral scavenger about. And then there's Norma — "

"Yes, there's Norma," said Jimmie, seriously.

"It 's unpleasant, you see. If she should know — "

"It would break her heart," said Jimmie.

Morland started and looked at Jimmie stupidly, his mental faculties for the second paralysed, incapable of grappling with the idea. Was it scathing sarcasm or sheer idiocy? Recovering his wits, he realised that Jimmie was whole-heartedly, childishly sincere. With an effort he controlled a rebellious risible muscle at the corner of his lip.

"It would give her great pain," he said in grave acquiescence.

"It 's a miserable business," said Jimmie.

Morland paced the studio. Suddenly he stopped.

"Should there be any unpleasantness over this, can I rely on your help to pull me through?"

"You know you can," said Jimmie.

Morland looked relieved.

"May I write a note?"

Jimmie pointed to a corner of the long deal table.

"You 'll find over there all the materials for mending a broken butterfly," he said sadly.

Chapter VI

THE LOVERS

PROUD in the make-believe that he was a fashionable groom, the loafer holding Morland's horse touched his ragged hat smartly at his temporary master's approach.

"Give him something, Jimmie; I have n't any change," cried Morland. He mounted and rode away, debonair, with a wave of farewell. Jimmie drew from his pocket the first coin to hand, a florin, and gave it to the loafer, who came down forthwith from his dreams of high estate to commonplace earth, and after the manner of his class adjured the Deity to love the munificent gentleman. The two shillings would bring gladness into the hearts of his sick wife and starving children. Subject to the attestation of the Deity, he put forward as a truth the statement that they had not eaten food for a week. He himself was a hard-working man, but the profession of holding horses in the quiet roads of St. John's Wood was not lucrative.

"You 're telling me lies, I 'm afraid," said Jimmie, "but you look miserable enough to say anything. Here!"

He gave him two more shillings. The loafer thanked him and made a bee-line for the nearest public-house, while Jimmie, forgetting for the moment the pitiable aspect that poor humanity sometimes wears in the persons of the lowly, watched Morland's well-set-up figure disappear at the turn of the road. There was no sign of black care

sitting behind that rider. It perched instead on Jimmie's shoulders, and there stayed for the rest of the day. In spite of his staunch trust in Morland's honour and uprightness, he found it hard to condone the fault. The parallel which Morland had not too ingenuously drawn with the far-away passionate episode in his own life had not seemed just. He had winced, wondered at the failure in tact, rebelled against the desecration of a memory so exquisitely sad. The moment after he had forgiven the blundering friend and opened his heart again to pity. He was no strict moralist, turning his head sanctimoniously aside at the sight of unwedded lovers. His heart was too big and generous. But between the romance of illicit love and the commonplace of vulgar seduction stretched an immeasurable distance. The words of the pathetic note, however, lingering in his mind, brought with them a redeeming fragrance. They conjured up the picture of sweet womanhood. They hinted no reproach; merely a trust which was expected to be fulfilled. To her Morland was the honourable gentleman all knew; he had promised nothing that he had not performed, that he would not perform. All day long, as he sat before his easel, mechanically copying folds of drapery from the lay figure on the platform, Jimmie strove to exonerate his friend from the baser fault, and to raise the poor love affair to a plane touched by diviner rays. But the black care still sat upon his shoulders.

The next morning he rose earlier than usual, and sought Morland at his house in Sussex Gardens. He found him eating an untroubled breakfast. Silver dishes, tray, and service were before him. A great flower-stand filled with Maréchal Niel roses stood in the centre of the table. Fine pictures hung round the walls. Rare china, old oak chairs,

and sideboard bright with silver bowls — all the harmonious and soothing luxury of a rich man's dining-room, gave the impression of ease, of a life apart from petty cares, petty vices, petty ambitions. A thick carpet sheltered the ears from the creaking footsteps of indiscretion. Awnings before the open windows screened the too impertinent light of the morning sun. And the face and bearing of the owner of the room were in harmony with its atmosphere. Jimmie reproached himself for the doubts that had caused his visit. Morland laughed at them. Had he not twice or thrice declared himself not a beast? Surely Jimmie must trust his oldest friend to have conducted himself honourably. There was never question of marriage. There had been no seduction. Could n't he understand? They had parted amicably some three months ago, each a little disillusioned. Morland was generous enough to strip a man's vanity from himself and stand confessed as one of whom a superior woman had grown tired. The new development of the affair revealed yesterday had, he repeated, come upon him like an unexpected lash. The irony of it, too, in the first flush of his engagement! Naturally he was remorseful; naturally he would do all that a man of honour could under the circumstances.

"More is not expected and not wanted. On my word of honour," said Morland.

He had been upset, he continued smilingly. The consequences might be serious — to himself, not so much to Jenny. There were complications in the matter that might be tightened — not by Jenny — into a devil of a tangle. Had he not pleaded special urgency when he had first asked Jimmie to take in the letters under a false name? It might be a devil of a tangle, he repeated.

"But till that happens—and please God it may never happen — we may dismiss the whole thing from our minds," said Morland, reassuringly. "Jenny will want for nothing, and want nothing. Do you think if there were any melodramatic villainy on my conscience I would go and engage myself to marry Norma Hardacre?"

This was the final argument that sent the black care, desperately clinging with the points of its claws, into infinite space. Jimmie smiled again. Morland waved away the uncongenial topic and called for a small bottle of champagne on ice. A glass apiece, he said, to toast the engagement. Rightly, champagne was the wine of the morning.

"It is the morning sunshine itself distilled," said Jimmie, lifting up his glass.

He went home on the top of an omnibus greatly cheered, convinced that, whatever had happened, Morland had done no grievous wrong. When Aline went to the studio to summon him to lunch, she found him busy upon the sketch portrait of Norma, and humming a tune — a habit of his when work was proceeding happily under his fingers. She looked over his shoulder critically.

"That's very good," she condescended to remark. "Now that Miss Hardacre is engaged to Mr. King, why don't you ask her to come and sit?"

"Do you think it's a good likeness?" he asked, leaning back and regarding the picture.

"It is the best likeness you have ever got in a portrait," replied Aline, truthfully.

"Then, wisest of infants, what reason could I have for asking Miss Hardacre to sit? Besides, I don't want her to know anything about it."

Aline glowed with inspiration. Why should things the

most distantly connected with somebody else's marriage so exhilarate the female heart?

"Is it going to be a wedding present, Jimmie?"

"It is a study in indiscretion, my child," he replied enigmatically.

"You are perfectly horrid."

"I suppose I am," he admitted, looking at the portrait with some wistfulness. "Ugly as sin, and with as much manners as a kangaroo—does your feminine wisdom think a woman could ever fall in love with me?"

She touched caressingly the top of his head where the hair was thinning, and her feminine wisdom made this astounding answer:

"Why, you are too old, Jimmie dear."

Too old! He turned and regarded her for a moment in rueful wonder. Absurd though it was, the statement gave him a shock. He was barely forty, and here was this full-grown, demure, smiling young woman telling him he was too old for any of her sex to trouble their heads about him. His forlorn aspect brought a rush of colour to the girl's cheeks. She put her arms round his neck.

"Oh, Jimmie, I have hurt you. I'm sorry. I'm a silly little goose. It's a wonder that every woman on earth isn't in love with you."

"That is the tone of exaggerated affection, but not of conviction," he said. "I am the masculine of what in a woman is termed *passée*. I might gain the esteem of a person of the opposite sex elderly like myself, but my gallant exterior can no longer inspire a romantic passion. My day is over. No, you have not hurt me. The sword of truth pierces, but it does not hurt."

Then he broke into his good, sunny laughter, and rose

and put his arm with rough tenderness round her shoulder, as he had done ever since she could walk.

"You are the youngest thing I have come across for a long time."

Aline, as she nestled up against him on their way out of the studio, was thus impressed with a salutary consciousness of her extreme youth. But this in itself magnified Jimmie's age. She loved him with a pure passionate tenderness; no one, she thought, could know him without loving him; but her ideal of the hero of romance for whom fair ladies pined away in despairing secret was far different. She was too young as yet, too little versed in the signs by which the human heart can be read, to suspect what his playful question implied of sadness, hopelessness, renunciation.

On Sunday they lunched with Connie Deering. Morland and Norma and old Colonel Pawley, an ancient acquaintance of every one, were the only other guests. It was almost a family party, cried Connie, gaily; and it had been an inspiration, seeing that the invitations had been sent out before the engagement had taken place. Jimmie and Aline, being the first arrivals, had their hostess to themselves for a few moments.

"They both think it bad form to show a sign of it, but they are awfully gone upon each other," Connie said. "So you must n't judge Norma by what she says. All girls like to appear cynical nowadays. It 's the fashion. But they fall in love in the same silly way, just as they used to."

"I am glad to hear they are fond of one another," said Jimmie. "The deeper their love the happier I shall be."

The little lady looked at him for a second out of the corner of her eye.

"What an odd thing to say!"

"It ought to be a commonplace thing to feel."

"In the happiness of others there is always something that is pleasing. By giving him the lie like that you will make poor Rochefoucauld turn in his grave."

"He ought to be kept revolving like Ixion," said Jimmie. "His maxims are the Beatitudes of Hell."

He laughed off the too trenchant edge of his epigram, qualifying it in his kind way. After all, you must n't take your cynic too literally. No doubt a kindly heart beats in the ducal bosom.

"I should like to know your real opinion of the devil," laughed Mrs. Deering.

The opportunity for so doing was lost for the moment. The lovers entered, having driven together from the Park. At the sight of Norma, Aline twitched Jimmie's arm with a little gasp of admiration and Jimmie's breath came faster. He had not seen her hitherto quite so coldly, radiantly beautiful. Perhaps it was the great white hat she wore, a mystery of millinery, chiffon and roses and feathers melting one with the other into an effect of broad simplicity, that formed an unsanctified but alluring halo to a queenly head. Perhaps it was the elaborately simple cream dress, open-worked at neck and arms, that moulded her ripe figure into especial stateliness. Perhaps, thought poor Jimmie, it was the proud loveliness into which love was wont to transfigure princesses.

She received Connie's kiss and outpouring of welcome with her usual mocking smile. "If you offer me congratulations, I shall go away, Connie. I have been smirking

for the last hour and a half. We were so exhausted by playing the sentimental idiots that we did n't exchange a word on our way here; though I believe Morland likes it. We saw those dreadful Fry-Robertsons bearing down upon us. He actually dragged me up to meet them, as who should say 'Let us go up and get congratulated.'"

"I don't see why I should hide my luck under a bushel," laughed Morland.

"Thank you for the compliment," said Norma. "But if you won at Monte Carlo you would n't pin the bank-notes all over your coat and strut about the street. By the way, Connie, we 're late. Need we apologise?"

"You 're not the last. Colonel Pawley is coming."

"Oh dear! that old man radiates boredom. How can you stand him, Connie?"

"He 's the sweetest thing on earth," said her hostess.

Norma laughed a little contemptuously and came forward to greet Aline and Jimmie. As she did so, her face softened. Jimmie, drawing her aside, offered his best wishes.

"The happiness of a man whom I have loved like a brother all my life can't be indifferent to me. On that account you must forgive my speaking warmly. May you be very happy."

"I shall be happy in having such a champion of my husband for a brother-in-law," said Norma, lightly.

"A loyal friend of your own, if you will," said Jimmie.

There was a short pause. Norma ran the tip of her gloved finger down the leaf of a plant on a stand. They were by the window. A vibration in his voice vaguely troubled her.

"What do you really mean by 'loyal'?" she said at last, without looking at him.

"The word has but one meaning. If I tried to explain further, I should only appear to be floundering in fatuity."

"I believe you are the kind that would stick to a woman through thick and thin, through good repute and ill repute. That's what you mean. Only you don't like to hint that I might at any time become disreputable. I may. All things are possible in this world."

"Not that," said Jimmie. "Perhaps I was unconsciously pleading for myself. Say you are a queen in your palace. While humbly soliciting a position in your household, I somewhat grandiloquently submit my qualifications."

"What's all this about?" asked Morland, coming up, having overheard the last sentence.

"I am pleading for a modest position in Her Majesty's Household," said Jimmie.

"We 'll fit him up with cap and bells," laughed Morland, "and make him chief jester, and give him a bladder to whack us over the head with. He's fond of doing that when we misbehave ourselves. Then he can get us out of our scrapes, like the fellow in Dumas — what's his name — Chicot, was n't it?"

Pleased with his jest, he turned to acquaint Connie with Jimmie's new dignity. Both the jest and the laugh that greeted it jarred upon Norma. Jimmie said to her good-humouredly:

"I might be Chicot, the loyal friend, without the cap and bells. I am a dull dog."

She looked out of the window and laughed somewhat bitterly.

"I think you are a great deal too good to have anything to do with any of us."

"It pleases you to talk arrant nonsense," said he.

Luncheon was announced. At table Jimmie and Norma were neighbours. Aline sat between Morland, who was next to Norma, and old Colonel Pawley. As the latter at first talked to Mrs. Deering, Aline and Morland carried on a frigid conversation. They had never been friends. To Morland, naturally, she was merely a little girl of no account, who had often been annoyingly in the way when he wanted to converse with Jimmie; and Aline, with a little girl's keen intuition, had divined more of his real character than she was aware of, and disliked and distrusted him. Like a well-brought-up young lady she answered "yes" and "no" politely to his remarks, but started no fresh topic. At last, to her relief, Colonel Pawley rescued her from embarrassed silence. To him she had extended her favour. He was a short fat man, with soft hands and a curious soft purring voice, and the air rather of a comfortable old lady than of a warrior who had retired on well-merited laurels. He occupied his plentiful leisure by painting on silk, which he made into fans for innumerable lady acquaintances. In his coat-tail pocket invariably reposed a dainty volume bound in crushed morocco—a copy of little poems of his own composition—and this, when he was in company with a sympathetic feminine soul, he would abstract with apoplectic wheezing and bashfully present. He also played little tunes on the harp. Aline, with the irreverence of youth, treated him as a kind of human toy.

His first word roused the girl's spontaneous gaiety. She bubbled over with banter. The mild old warrior chuckled with her, threw himself unreservedly into the childish play. Connie whispered to Jimmie:

"I should like to tie a bit of blue ribbon round his neck and turn him loose in a meadow. I am sure he would frisk."

Morland exchanged casual remarks with Norma. She answered absently. The change in Aline from the unsmiling primness wherewith Morland's society had cloaked her to sunny merriment with Colonel Pawley was too marked to escape her attention. In spite of the ludicrousness of the comparison, she could not help perceiving that the old man who radiated boredom had a quality of charm unpossessed by Morland, and she felt absurdly disappointed with her lover. During the last few days she had made up her mind to like him. Sober forecast of a lifetime spent in the inevitable intimacy of marriage had forced her to several conclusions. One, that it was essential to daily comfort that a woman should find the personality of a husband pleasing rather than antipathetic. With more ingenuousness than the world would have put to her credit, she had set herself deliberately to attain this essential ideal. The natural consequence was a sharply critical attitude and a quickly developing sensitiveness, whereby, as in a balance of great nicety, the minor evidences of his character were continually being estimated. Thus, Morland's jest before luncheon had jarred upon her. His careless air of patronage had betrayed a lack of appreciation of something — the word "spiritual" was not in her vocabulary, or she might have used it — of something, at all events, in his friend which differentiated him from the casual artist and which she herself had, not without discomfort, divined at their first meeting. The remark had appeared to her in bad taste. Still ruffled, she became all the more critical, and noted with displeasure his failure to have won a child's

esteem. And yet she felt a touch of resentment against Jimmie for being the innocent cause of her discomposure. It gave rise to a little feline impulse to scratch him and see whether he were not mortal like every one else.

"Do you ever exhibit at the Royal Academy?" she asked suddenly.

"They won't have me," said he.

"But you send in, don't you?"

"With heart-breaking regularity. They did have me once." He sighed. "But that was many years ago, when the Academy was young and foolish."

"I have heard they are exceedingly conservative," said Norma, with the claws still unsheathed. "Perhaps you work on too original lines."

But she could draw from him no expression of vanity. He smiled. "I suppose they don't think my pictures good enough," he said simply.

"Jimmie's work is far too good for that wretched Academy," said Connie Deering. "The pictures there always give you a headache. Jimmie's never do."

"I should like to kill the Academy," Aline broke in sharply, on the brink of tears. A little tragedy of murdered hopes lurked in her tone. Then, seeing that she had caused a startled silence, she reddened and looked at her plate. Jimmie laughed outright.

"Is n't she bloodthirsty? All the seventy of them weltering in their gore! Only the other day she said she would like to slaughter the whole Chinese Empire, because they ate puppies and birds'-nests!"

Connie chimed a frivolous remark in tune with Jimmie. Morland, as befitted a coming statesman, took up the parable of the march westwards of the yellow races. Colonel

Pawley, who had been through the Taeping rebellion, was appealed to as an authority on the development of the Chinaman. He almost blushed, wriggled uncomfortably, and as soon as he could brought the conversation to the milder topic of Chinese teacups. Successful, he sighed with relief and told Aline the story of the willow pattern. The Royal Academy was forgotten. But Norma felt guilty and ashamed.

Nor was she set more at ease with herself by a careless remark of Morland's as Connie's front door closed behind them an hour or so later.

"I am afraid you rather rubbed it into poor old Jimmie about the Academy. The little girl looked as if she would like to fly at you. She is a spoiled little cat."

"I have noticed she does n't seem to like you," answered Norma, sourly.

The drive as far as Grosvenor Place, where Norma proposed to pay a solitary call, was not as pleasant as he had anticipated. He parted from her somewhat resentful of an irritable mood, and walked back towards Sussex Gardens through the Park, reviling the capriciousness of woman.

Chapter VII

A MAD PROPHET

A VIOLENT man, pallid and perspiring, with crazy dark eyes and a voice hoarse from the effort to make himself heard above the noise of a hymn-singing group a few yards to the right and of a brazen-throated atheist on the left, was delivering his soul of its message to mankind — a confused, disconnected, oft-delivered message, so inconsequent as to suggest that it had been worn into shreds and tatters of catch-phrases by process of over-delivery, yet uttered with the passion of one inspired with a new and amazing gospel.

"I am speaking to you, the working-men, the proletariat, the downtrodden slaves of the plutocracy, the creators in darkness of the wealth that the idlers enjoy in dazzling halls of brightness. I do not address the bourgeoisie rotting in sloth and apathy. They are the parasites of the rich. They sweat the workers in order to pander to the vices of the rich. They despise the poor and grovel before the rich. They shrink from touching the poor man's hand, but they offer their bodies slavishly to the kick of the rich man's foot. It is not in their hands, but in yours, brother toilers and brother sufferers, that lies the glorious work of the great social revolution whose sun just rising is tipping the mountain-tops with its radiant promise of an immortal day. It is against them and not with them that

you have to struggle. In that day of Armageddon you will find all tailordom, all grocerdom, all apothecarydom, all attorneydom arrayed in serried ranks around the accursed standards of plutocracy, of aristocracy, of bureaucracy. Beware of them. Have naught to do with them on peril of your salvation. The great social revolution will come not from above, but from below, from the depths. *De profundis clamavi!* From the depths have I cried, O Lord!"

He paused, wiped his forehead, cleared his throat, and went on in the same strain, indifferent to ribald interjections and the Sunday apathy of his casual audience. The mere size of the crowd he was addressing seemed to satisfy him. The number was above the average. A few working-men in the inner ring drank in the wild utterances with pathetic thirst. The majority listened, half amused, half attracted by the personality of the speaker. A great many were captivated by the sonority of the words, the unfaltering roll of the sentences, the vague associations and impressions called up by the successive images. It is astonishing what little account our sociological writers take of the elementary nature of the minds of the masses; how easily they are amused; how readily they are imposed upon; how little they are capable of analytical thought; at the same time, how intellectually vain they are, which is their undoing. The ineptitudes of the music hall which make the judicious grieve — the satirical presentment, for instance, of the modern fop, which does not contain one single salient characteristic of the type, which is the blatant convention of fifty years back — are greeted with roars of unintelligent laughter. Books are written, vulgar, fallacious, with a specious semblance of philosophical profundity, and sell by the hundred thousand. The masses read them

without thought, without even common intelligence. It is too great an intellectual effort to grasp the ideas so disingenuously presented; but the readers can understand just enough to perceive vaguely that they are in touch with the deeper questions of philosophy, and through sheer vanity delude themselves into the belief that they are vastly superior people in being able to find pleasure in literature of such high quality. And the word Mesopotamia is still blessed in their ears. Nothing but considerations such as these can explain the popularity of some of the well-known Sunday orators in Hyde Park. The conductors of the various properly organised mission services belong naturally to a different category. It is the socialist, the revivalist, the atheist, the man whose blood and breath seem to have turned into inexhaustible verbiage, that present the problem.

Some such reflections forced themselves into the not uncharitable mind of Jimmie as he stood on the outer fringe of the pallid man's audience and listened wonderingly to the inspired nonsense. He had left a delighted Aline to be taken by Colonel Pawley to the Zoological Gardens, and had strolled down from Bryanston Square to the north side of the Park. To lounge pleasantly on a Sunday afternoon from group to group had always been a favourite Sunday pastime, and the pallid man was a familiar figure. Jimmie had often thought of painting him as the central character of some historical picture — an expectorated Jonah crying to Nineveh, or a Flagellant in the time of the plague, with foaming mouth and bleeding body, calling upon the stricken city to repent. His artist's vision could see the hairy, haggard, muscular anatomy beneath the man's rusty black garments. He could make a capital picture out of him.

The man paused only for a few seconds, and again took up his parable — the battle of the poor and the rich. The flow of words poured forth, platitude on platitude, in turbid flood, sound and fury signifying elusively, sometimes the collectivist doctrine, at others the mere *sans-culotte* hatred of the aristocrat. Jimmie, speculating on the impression made by the oratory on the minds of the audience, moved slightly apart from the crowd. His glance wandering away took in Morland on his way home, walking sedately on the path towards the Marble Arch. He ran across the few yards of intervening space and accosted his friend gaily.

"Come and have a lesson in public speaking, and at the same time hear the other side of the political question."

"What! go and stand among that rabble?" cried Morland, aghast.

"You 'll have to stand among worse, so you had better get used to it. Besides, the man is a delightful fellow, with a face like Habakkuk, capable of everything. To hear him one would think he were erupting red-hot lava, whereas really it is molten omelette. Come. Your purple and fine linen will be a red rag to him."

Laughing, he dragged the protesting Morland within earshot of the speaker. Morland listened superciliously for a few moments.

"What possible amusement can you find in this drivel?" he asked.

"It is so devilish pathetic," said Jimmie, "so human — the infinite aspiration and the futile accomplishment. Listen."

The hymn next door had ceased, the atheist was hunting up a reference, and the words of the pallid man's peroration resounded startlingly in the temporary silence:

"In that day when the sovereign people's will is law, when the weakest and the strongest shall share alike in the plenteous bounty of Providence, no longer shall the poor be mangled beneath the Juggernaut car of wealth, no longer shall your daughters be bound to the rich man's chariot-wheels and whirled shrieking into an infamy worse than death, no longer shall the poor man's soul burn with hell fire at the rich man's desecration of the once pure woman that he loves, no more rottenness, foulness, stench, iniquity, but the earth shall rest in purity, securely folded in the angel wings of peace!"

He waved his arms in a gesture of dismissal, turned his back on the crowd, and sat down exhausted on the little wooden bench that had been his platform. The crowd gradually moved away, some laughing idly, others reflectively chewing the cud of their Barmecide meal. Morland pointed a gold-mounted cane at the late speaker.

"Who and what is this particular brand of damned fool?"

Jimmie checked with a glance a working-man who had issued from the inner ring and was passing by, and translated Morland's question into soberer English.

"Him?" replied the working-man. "That 's Daniel Stone, sir. Some people say he 's cracked, but he always has something good to say and I like listening to him."

"What does he do when he is n't talking?" asked Jimmie.

"Snatches a nap and a mouthful of food, I should say, sir," said the man, with a laugh. He caught Jimmie's responsive smile, touched his cap, like the downtrodden slave that he was, and went on his way. Jimmie glanced round for Morland and saw him striding off rapidly. He ran after him.

"What is the hurry?"

"That damned man —"

"Which? The one I was talking to? You surely did n't object —?"

"Of course not. The other — Daniel Stone —"

"Well, what of him?"

"He 's a dangerous lunatic. I have heard of him. Why the devil did you want me to make an exhibition of myself among this scum?"

Jimmie stared. Morland broke into a laugh and held out his hand. "Never mind. The beast got on my nerves with his chariot wheels and his desecration of maidens and the rest of it. I must be off. Good-bye."

Jimmie watched him disappear through the gate and turned back towards the groups. The pallid man was still sitting on his bench; a few children hung round and scanned him idly. Presently he rose and tucked his bench under his arm, and walked slowly away from the scene of his oratory. His burning eyes fixed themselves on Jimmie as he passed by. Jimmie accosted him.

"I have been greatly interested in your address."

"I saw you with another of the enemies of mankind. You are a gentleman, I suppose?"

"I hope so," said Jimmie, smiling.

"Then I have nothing to do with you," retorted the man, with an angry gesture. "I hate you and all your class."

"But what have we done to you?"

"You have turned my blood into gall and my soul into consuming fire."

"Let us get out of the dust and sit down under a tree and talk it over. We may get to understand each other."

"I have no wish to understand you," said the man, coldly. "Good-day to you."

"Good-day," said Jimmie, with a smile. "I am sorry you will not let us be better acquainted."

He turned to the next group, who were listening to a disproof of God's existence. But the atheist was a commonplace thunderer in a bowler hat, whose utterances fell tame on Jimmie's ears after those of the haggard-eyed prophet. He wandered away from the crowd, striking diagonally across the Park, and when he found comparative shade and solitude, cast himself on the grass beneath a tree. The personality of Daniel Stone interested him. He began to speculate on his daily life, his history. Why should he have vowed undying hatred against his social superiors? He reminded Jimmie of a character in fiction, and after some groping the association was recalled. It was the monk in Dumas, the son of Miladi. He wove an idle romance about the man. Perhaps Stone was the disinherited of noble blood, thirsting for a senseless vengeance. Gradually the drowsiness of deep June fell upon him. He went fast asleep, and when he awoke half an hour afterwards and began to walk homewards, he thought no more of Daniel Stone.

But on following Sunday afternoons he frequently stood for a while to listen to the man. It was always the same tale — sound and fury, signifying nothing. On one occasion he caught Jimmie's eye, and denounced him vehemently as an enemy of society. After that, Jimmie, who was of a peaceful disposition, ceased attending his lectures. He sympathised with Morland.

Chapter VIII

HER SERENE HIGHNESS

A PRETTY quarrel between a princess and a duchess gave rise to circumstances in which the destiny of Jimmie was determined, or in which, to speak with modern metaphor, the germ of his destiny found the necessary conditions for development. Had it not been for this quarrel, Jimmie would not have stayed at the Hardacres' house; and had he not been their guest, the events hereafter to be recorded would not have happened. Such concatenation is there in the scheme of human affairs.

The Duchess of Wiltshire was a mighty personage in the Hardacres' part of the county. She made social laws and abrogated them. She gave and she took away the brevet of county rank. She made and unmade marriages. To fall under the ban of her displeasure was to be disgraced indeed. She held a double sway in that the duke, her husband, had delegated to her his authority in sublunary matters, he being a severe mathematician and a dry astronomer, who looked at the world out of dull eyes, and regarded it with indifference as a mass of indistinguishable atoms forming a nebula, a sort of Milky Way, concerning which philosophic minds had from time to time theorised. He lived icily remote from society; the duchess, on the contrary, was warmly interested in its doings. In the county she reigned absolute; but in London, recognising the fact that there were other duchesses scattered about

Mayfair and Belgravia, she was high-minded enough to modify her claims to despotic government. She felt it, however, her duty to decree that her last reception should mark the end of the London season.

To this reception the Hardacres were always invited. In previous years they had mounted the great staircase of Wiltshire House, their names had been called out, the duchess had given them the tips of her fingers, and the duke, tall, white-haired, ascetic, had let them touch his hand with the air of a man absently watching ants crawl over him; they had passed on, mixed with the crowd, and seen their host and hostess no more. But this year, to Mrs. Hardacre's thrilling delight, the duchess gave her quite a friendly squeeze, smiled her entire approbation of Mrs. Hardacre's existence, and detained her for a moment in conversation.

"Don't forget to come and have a little talk with me later. I have n't seen you since dear Norma's engagement."

To dear Norma she was equally urbane, called her a lucky girl, and presented her as a bride-elect to the duke, who murmured a vague formula of congratulation which he had remembered from early terrestrial days.

"I can't tell you how proud I am of you, Norma!" said Mrs. Hardacre, with a lump in her throat, as they passed on. "The dear duchess! I wonder if I am sufficiently grateful to Providence."

Norma, although in her heart pleased by the manifestation of ducal favour, could not let the opportunity for a taunt pass by.

"You can refer to it in your prayers, mother: 'O God, I thank Thee for shedding Her Grace upon me.' Won't that do, father?"

"Eh, what?" asked Mr. Hardacre, very red in the face, trailing half a pace behind his wife and daughter.

Norma repeated her form of Thanksgiving.

"Ha! ha! Devilish good! Tell that in the club," he said in high good-humour. His wife's glance suddenly withered him.

"I don't approve of blasphemy," she said.

"Towards whom, mother dear?" asked Norma, suavely. "The Almighty or the duchess?"

"Both," said Mrs. Hardacre, with a snap.

Mr. Hardacre, seeing in the distance a man to whom he thought he could sell a horse, escaped from the domestic wrangle. Mother and daughter wandered through the crowd, greeted by friends, pausing here and there to exchange a few words, until they came to the door of the music-room, filled to overflowing, where an operatic singer held the assembly in well-bred silence. At the door the crush was ten deep. On the outskirts conversation hummed like an echo of the noise from the suite of rooms behind. There they were joined by Morland. Mrs. Hardacre told him of the duchess's graciousness. He grinned, taking the information with the air of a man to whom the favour of duchesses bestowed upon his betrothed is a tribute to his own excellence. He thought she would be pleased, he said. They must get the old girl to come to the wedding. Mrs. Hardacre was pained, but she granted young love indulgence for the profanity. If they only could, she assented, the success of the ceremony would be assured. Norma turned to Morland with a laugh.

"We shall be married with a vengeance, if it 's sanctified by the duchess. Do you think a parson is at all necessary?"

He joined in her mirth. She drew him aside.

"Well, what's the news?"

He accounted, loverwise, for his day. At last he said:

"I looked in upon Jimmie Padgate this morning. I wanted him to go to Christie's and buy a picture or two for me — for us, I ought to say," he added, with a little bow. "He knows more about 'em than I do. He's a happy beggar, you know," he exclaimed, after a short pause.

"What makes you say so?"

"His perfect conviction that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. There he was sitting at lunch over the black scrag end of a boiled mutton bone and a rind of some astonishing-looking yellow cheese — absolutely happy. And he waved his hand towards it as if it had been a feast of Lucullus and asked me to share it."

"Did you?" asked Norma.

"I had n't time," said Morland. "I was fearfully busy to-day."

Norma did not reply. She looked over the heads of the crowd in front of her towards the music-room whence came the full notes of the singer. Then she said to him with a little shiver:

"I am glad you are a rich man, Morland."

"So am I. Otherwise I should not have got you."

"That's true enough," she said. "I pretend to scoff at all this, but I could n't live without it."

"It has its points," he assented, turning and regarding the brilliant scene.

Norma turned with him. She was glad it was her birthright and her marriage-right. The vast state ball-

room, lit as with full daylight by rows of electric lamps cunningly hidden behind the cornices and the ground-glass panels of the ceiling, stately with its Corinthian pilasters and classic frieze, its walls adorned with priceless pictures, notably four full-length cavaliers of Vandyck, smiling down in their high-bred way upon this assembly of their descendants, its atmosphere glittering with jewels, radiant with colour, contained all the magnificence, all the aristocracy, all the ambitions, all the ideals that she had been trained to worship, to set before her as the lodestars of her life's destiny. Here and there from amid the indistinguishable mass of diamonds, the white flesh of women's shoulders, the black and white chequer and brilliant uniforms of men, flashed out the familiar features of some possessor of an historic name, some woman of world-famed beauty, some great personage whose name was on the lips of Europe. There, by the wall, lonely for the moment, stood the Chinese Ambassador, in loose maroon silk, and horse-tail plumed cap, his yellow, wizened face rendered more sardonic by the thin drooping grey moustache and thin grey imperial, looking through horn spectacles, expressionless, impassive, inhumanly indifferent, at one of the most splendid scenes a despised civilisation could set before him. There, in the centre of a group of envious and unembarrassed ladies, an Indian potentate blazed in diamonds and emeralds, and rolled his dusky eyes on charms which (most oddly to his Oriental conceptions) belonged to other men. Here a Turk's red fez, a Knight of the Garter's broad blue sash, an ambassador's sparkle of stars and orders; and there the sweet, fresh rosebud beauty of a girl caught for a moment and lost in the moving press. And there, at the end of the vast, living hall, a dimly seen haggard woman, with a

diamond tiara on her grey hair, surrounded by a little court of the elect, sat Her Serene Highness, the Princess of Herren-Rothbeck, sister to a reigning monarch, and bosom friend, despite the pretty quarrel, of Her Grace the Duchess of Wiltshire.

The song in the music-room coming to an end, the audience for the most part rose and pressed into the ballroom. The Hardacres and Morland were driven forward. There was a long period of desultory conversation with acquaintances. Morland, proud in the possession of Norma's beauty, remained dutifully attendant, and received congratulations with almost blushing gratification. Mrs. Hardacre, preoccupied by anticipation of her promised talk with the duchess, kept casting distracted glances at the door whereby the great lady would enter. The appearance from a group of neighbouring people of a pleasant young fellow with a fair moustache and very thin fair hair, who greeted her cordially, brought her back to the affairs of the moment. This was the Honourable Charlie Sandys, a distant relative of the duchess, and her Grand Vizier, Master of the Horse, Groom of the Chambers, and general right-hand man. He was two and twenty, and had all the amazing wisdom of that ingenuous age. Morland shook hands with him, but being tapped on the arm by the fan of a friendly dowager, left him to converse alone with Mrs. Hardacre and Norma. The youth indicated Morland's retiring figure by a jerk of the head.

"Parliament — Cosford division."

"We hope so," said Mrs. Hardacre.

"Must get in. Radical for her constituency would make duchess buy her coffin. The end of the world for her. She has a great idea of King. Going to take him

up *con amore*. And when she does take anybody up—well—"

His wave of the hand signified the tremendous consequences.

"She does n't merely uproot *him*," said Norma, whose mind now and then worked with disconcerting swiftness, "but she takes up also the half-acre where he is planted."

"Just so," replied the youth. "Not only him, but his manservant and maidservant, his ox and his ass and everything that is his. Funny woman, you know—one of the best, of course, but quaint. Thinks the Member for Cosford is ordained by Providence to represent her in Parliament."

He rattled on, highly pleased with himself. Norma cast a malicious glance at her mother, who perceptibly winced. They were shining in the duchess's eyes in a light borrowed from Morland. They were taken up with the ox and the ass and the remainder of Morland's live-stock. That was the reason, then, of the exceptional marks of favour bestowed on them by Her Grace. Mrs. Hardacre kept the muscles of her lips at the smile, but her steely eyes grew hard. Norma, on the contrary, was enjoying herself. Charlie Sandys was unconscious of the little comedy.

"I am glad to see the princess here to-night," said Mrs. Hardacre, by way of turning the conversation.

The youth made practically the same reply as he had made at least a dozen times to the same remark during the course of the evening. He was an injudicious Groom of the Chambers, being vain of the privileges attached to his post.

"There has been an awful row, you know," he said confidentially, looking round to see that he was not overheard. "They have scarcely made it up yet."

"Do tell us about it, Mr. Sandys," said Norma, smiling upon him.

"It 's rather a joke. Let us get out of the way and I 'll tell you."

He piloted them through the crush into a corridor, and found them a vacant seat by some palms.

"It 's all about pictures," he resumed. "Princess wants to have her portrait painted in London. Why she should n't have it made in Germany I don't know. Anyhow she comes to duchess for advice. Duchess has taken up Foljambe, you know — chap that has painted about twenty miles of women full length — "

"We saw the dear duchess at his Private View," Mrs. Hardacre interjected.

"Yes. She runs him for all she 's worth. Told the princess there was only one man possible for her portrait, and that was Foljambe. Princess — she 's as hard as nails, you know — inquires his price, knocks him down half. He agrees. Everything is arranged. Princess to sit for the portrait when she stays with duchess at Chiltern Towers in September — "

"Oh, we are going to have the princess down with us? " Mrs. Hardacre grew more alert.

"Yes. Could n't find time to sit now — going next week to Herren-Rothbeck — coming back in September. Well, it was all settled nicely — you know the duchess's way. On Friday, however, she takes the princess to see Foljambe's show — for the first time. Just like her. The princess looks round, drops her lorgnon, cries out, 'Lieber Gott in Himmel! The man baints as if he was bainting on de bavement!' and utterly refuses to have anything to do with him. I tell you there were ructions! "

He embraced a knee and leant back, laughing boyishly at the memory of the battle royal between the high-born dames.

"Then who is going to paint the portrait?" asked Norma.

"That 's what I am supposed to find out," replied the youth. "But I can't get a man to do it cheap enough. One can't go to a swell R. A. and ask him to paint a portrait of a princess for eighteen pence."

Norma had an inspiration.

"Can I recommend a friend of mine?"

"Would he do it?"

"I think so — if I asked him."

"By Jove, who is he?" asked the youth, pulling down his shirtcuff for the purpose of making memoranda.

"Mr. James Padgate, 10 Friary Grove, N. W. He is Mr. King's most intimate friend."

"He can paint all right, can't he?" asked the youth.

"Beautifully," replied Norma. "Friary, not Priory," she corrected, watching him make the note. She felt the uncommon satisfaction of having performed a virtuous act; one almost of penance for her cruelty to him on Sunday week, the memory of which had teased a not over-sensitive conscience. The scrag end of boiled mutton and the rind of cheese had also affected her, stirred her pity for the poor optimist, although in a revulsion of feeling she had shivered at his lot. She had closed her eyes for a second, and some impish wizardry of the brain had conjured up a picture of herself sitting down to such a meal, with Jimmie at the other side of the table. It was horrible. She had turned to fill her soul with the solid magnificence about her. The pity for Jimmie lingered, however, as a soothing sensation,

and she welcomed the opportunity of playing Lady Bountiful. She glanced with some malice from the annotated cuff to her mother's face, expecting to see the glitter of disapproval in her eyes. To her astonishment, Mrs. Hardacre wore an expression of pleased abstraction.

Charlie Sandys pocketed his gold pencil and retired. He was a young man with the weight of many affairs on his shoulders.

"That's a capital idea of yours, Norma," said Mrs. Hardacre.

"I 'm glad you think so," replied Norma, wonderingly.

"I do. It was most happy. We 'll do all we can to help Morland's friend. A most interesting man. And if the princess gives him the commission, we can ask him down to Heddon to stay with us while he is painting the picture."

Norma was puzzled. Hitherto her mother had turned up the nose of distaste against Mr. Padgate and all his works. Whence this sudden change? Not from sweet charitableness, that was certain. Hardly from desire to please Morland. Various solutions ran in her head. Did an overweening ambition prompt her mother to start forth a rival to the duchess, as a snapper up of unconsidered painters? Scarcely possible. Defiance of the duchess? That way madness could only lie; and she was renowned for the subtle caution of her social enterprises. The little problem of motive interested her keenly. At last the light flashed upon her, and she looked at Mrs. Hardacre almost with admiration.

"What a wonderful brain you have, mother!" she cried, half mockingly, half in earnest. "Fancy your having schemed out all that in three minutes."

Enjoyment of this display of worldcraft was still in her eyes when she came across Morland a little later; but she only told him of her recommendation of Jimmie to paint the princess's portrait. He professed delight. How had she come to think of it?

"I think I must have caught the disease of altruism from Mr. Padgate," she said. Then following up an idle train of thought:

"I suppose you often put work — portraits and things — in his way?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Why not? You know hundreds of wealthy people."

"Jimmie is not a man to be patronised," said Morland, sententiously, "and really, you know, I can't go about touting for commissions for him."

"Of course not," said Norma; "he is far too insignificant a person to trouble one's head about."

Morland looked pained.

"I don't like to hear you talk in that way about Jimmie," he said reproachfully.

The little scornful curl appeared on her lip.

"Don't you?" was all she vouchsafed to say. Unreasonably irritated, she turned aside and caught a passing *attaché* of the French Embassy. Morland, dismissed, sauntered off, and Norma went down to supper with the young Frenchman, who entertained her for half an hour with a technical description of his motor-car. And the trouble, he said, to keep it in order. It needed all the delicate cares of a baby. It was as variable as a woman.

"I know," said Norma, stifling a yawn. "*La donna e automobile.*"

On the drive home in the hired brougham, whose ob-

vious hiredom caused Norma such chafing of spirit, Mrs. Hardacre glowed with triumph, and while her husband dozed dejectedly opposite, she narrated her good fortunes. She had had her little chat with the duchess. They had spoken of Mr. Padgate, Charlie Sandys having run to show her his cuff immediately. The duchess looked favourably on the proposal. A friend of Mr. King's was a recommendation in itself. But the princess, she asseverated with ducal disregard of metaphor, had her own ideas of art and would not buy a pig in a poke. They must inspect Mr. Padgate's work before there was any question of commission. She would send Charlie Sandys to them to-morrow to talk over the necessary arrangements.

"I told her," said Mrs. Hardacre, "that Mr. Padgate was coming to pay us a visit in any case in September, and suggested that he could drive over to Chiltern Towers every morning while the princess was honouring him with sittings, and paint the picture there. And she quite jumped at the idea."

"No doubt," said Norma, drily.

But her dryness had no withering effect on her mother's exuberance. The hard woman saw the goal of a life's ambition within easy reach, and for the exultant moment softened humanly. She chattered like a school-girl.

"And she took me up to the princess," she said, "and presented me as her nearest country neighbour. Was n't that nice of her? And the princess is such a sweet woman."

"Dear, dear!" said Norma. "How wicked people are! Every one says she is the most vinegarish old cat in Christendom."

Chapter IX

SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION

FAME and fortune were coming at last. There was no doubt of it in Jimmie's optimistic mind. For years they had lagged with desperately heavy feet, but now they were in sight, slowly approaching, hand in hand. Jimmie made fantastic preparations to welcome them, and wore his most radiant smile. In vain did Aline, with her practical young woman's view of things, point to the exiguity of the price fixed by Her Serene Highness. If that was the advent of fortune, she came in very humble guise, the girl insinuated. Jimmie, with a magnificent sweep of the hand, dismissed such contemptible considerations as present pounds, shillings, and pence. He was going to paint the portrait of the sister of a reigning monarch. Did not Aline see that this might lead to his painting the portrait of the reigning monarch himself? Would not the counterfeit presentment of one crowned head attract the attention of other crowned heads to the successful artist? Did she not see him then appointed painter in ordinary to all the emperors, kings, queens, princes, and princesses of Europe? He would star the Continent, make a royal progress from court to court, disputed for by potentates and flattered by mighty sovereigns. He grew dithyrambic, a condition in which Aline regarded him as hopelessly impervious to reason. His portraits, he said, would adorn halls of state, and the dreams that he put on canvas,

hitherto disregarded by a blind world, would find places of honour in the Treasure Houses of the Nations. It would be fame for him and fortune for Aline. She should go attired in silk and shod with gold. She should have a stall at the theatre whenever she wanted, and a carriage and pair to fetch her home. She should eat vanilla ices every night. And then she might marry a prince and live happy ever after.

"I don't want to marry a prince or any one else, dear," Aline said once, bringing visions down into the light of common day. "I just want to go on staying with you."

On another occasion she hinted at his possible espousal of a princess. Again Jimmie dropped from the empyrean, and rubbed his head ruefully. There was only one princess in the world for him, an enthroned personage of radiant beauty who now and then took warm pity on him and admitted him to her friendship, but of whom it were disloyalty worse than all folly to think of. And yet he could not help his heart leaping at the sight of her, or the thrill quivering through him when he saw the rare softness come into her eyes which he and none other had evoked. What he had to give her he could give to no other woman, no other princess. The gift was unoffered: it remained in his own keeping, but consecrated to the divinity. He enshrined it, as many another poor chivalrous wretch has done, in an exquisite sanctuary, making it the symbol of a vague sweet religion whose secret observances brought consolation. But of all this, not a whisper, not a sign to Aline. When she spoke of marriageable princesses, he explained the rueful rubbing of his head by reference to his unattractive old fogeydom, and his unfitness for the life of high society.

But Aline ought to have her prince. The coming

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fortune would help to give the girl what was due to her. For himself he cared nothing. Cold mutton and heel of cheese would satisfy him to the end of his days. And fame? In quieter moments he shrugged his shoulders. An artist has a message to deliver to his generation, and how can he deliver it if he cannot sell his pictures? Let him give out to the world what was best in him, and he would be content. Let him but be able to say, "I have delivered my message," and that would be fame enough.

These were things of the depths. The surface of his mood was exuberant, almost childish, delight, tempered with whimsical diffidence in his power of comporting himself correctly towards such high personages. For the duchess, who never did things by halves, and was also determined, as she had said, of not buying a pig in a poke, had conveyed to him the intimation that Her Serene Highness the Princess of Herren-Rothbeck would honour him with a visit to his studio on the following Thursday. Jimmie and Aline held long counsel together. What was the proper way to receive a Serene Highness? Jimmie had a vague idea of an awning outside the door and a strip of red baize down the steps and across the pavement. Tony Merewether, who was called into consultation, suggested, with the flippancy of youth, a brass band and a chorus of maidens to strew flowers; whereat Aline turned her back upon him, and Jimmie, adding pages in fancy dress to hold up the serene train and a major-domo in a court suit with a wand, encouraged the offender. Aline retired from so futile a discussion and went on sewing in dignified silence. At last she condescended to throw out a suggestion.

"If I were you, Jimmie, I should get the princess some portraits to look at."

"God bless my soul," cried Jimmie, putting down his pipe, "I never thought of it. Tony, my boy, that child with the innocence of the dove combines the wisdom of the original serpent. My brain reels to think what I should be without her. We 'll telegraph to all the people that have sat to me and ask them to send in their portraits by Thursday."

He crossed the studio and began to rummage among the litter on the long table. Aline asked him what he was looking for.

"Telegram forms. Why have n't we got any? Tony, run round the corner to the post-office, like a good boy, and get some."

But Aline checked the execution of this maniacal project. Three portraits would be quite sufficient. Jimmie would have to pick out three ladies of whom he could best ask such a favour, and write them polite little notes and offer to send a van in the orthodox way to collect the pictures. Jimmie bowed before such sagacity, and wrote the letters.

In the course of the week the portraits arrived, and the studio for a whole day became the undisputed kingdom of Aline and a charwoman. The long untidy table, so dear to Jimmie, was ruthlessly cleared and set in dismaying order. The frame-maker was summoned, and the unsold pictures that had long slumbered sadly on the ground with their faces to the wall, were dusted and hung in advantageous lights. The square of Persian carpet, which Jimmie during an unprotected walk through Regent Street had once bought for Aline's bedroom, was brought down and spread on the bare boards of the model-platform. A few cushions were scattered about the rusty drawing-room suite, and

various odds and ends of artists' properties, bits of drapery, screens, old weapons, were brought to light and used for purposes of decoration. So that when Jimmie, who had been banished the house for the day, returned in the evening, he found a flushed and exhausted damsel awaiting him in a transfigured studio.

"My dear little girl," he said, touched, "my dear little girl, it 's beautiful, it 's magical. But you have tired yourself to death. Why did n't you let me do all this?"

"You would never have done it yourself, Jimmie. You know you would n't," said Aline. "You would have gone on talking nonsense about red baize strips and flower-girls and pages — anything to make those about you laugh and be happy — and you would never have thought of showing off what you have to its full advantage."

"I should never have dreamed of robbing your poor little room of its carpet, dear," he said.

They went upstairs for their simple evening meal, and returned as usual to the beloved studio. Aline filled Jimmie's pipe.

"Do you think I dare smoke in all this magnificence?"

She laughed and struck a match.

"You did not realise what a lot of beautiful pictures you had, did you?"

"They make a brave show," he said, looking round. "After all, I'm not entirely sorry they have never been sold. I should not like to part with them. No, I did not realise how many there were." In spite of his cheeriness the last words sounded a note of pathos that caught the girl's sensitive ear.

"Let us make a tour of inspection," she said. They went the round, pausing long before each picture. He

said little, contrary to his habit, for he was wont to descant on his work with playful magniloquence. He saw the years unfold behind him and disclose the hopes of long ago yet unfulfilled. What endless months of dreams and thrills and passionate toil hung profitless upon these walls! Things there were, wrought from the depths of his radiant faith in man, plucked from the heart of his suffering, consecrated by the purest visions of his soul. Had Aline been an older woman, a woman who had loved him, lived with him in a wife's intimate communion, instead of being merely the tender-hearted child of his adoption, she would have wept her heart out. For she, alone of mortals, would have got behind such imperfections as there were, and would have seen nothing but a crucifixion of the quivering things torn out of the life of the beloved man. Only vaguely, elusively did the girl feel this. But even her half-comprehending sympathy was of great comfort. She thought no one in the world could paint like Jimmie, and held in angry contempt a public that could pass him by. She was hotly his advocate, furious at his rejection by hanging committees, miserably disappointed when his pictures came back from exhibitions unsold, or when negotiations with dealers for rights of reproduction fell through. But she was too young to pierce to the heart of the tragedy; and Jimmie was too brave and laughter-loving to show his pain. Other forces, too, had been at work in her development. Recently her mind had been grappling with the problem of her unpayable debt to him. This silent pilgrimage round the years brought her thoughts instinctively to herself and the monstrous burden she had been.

"I have been wondering lately, Jimmie dear," she said at last, "whether you would not have been more successful

if you had not had all the worry and expense and responsibility of me."

"Good Lord!" he cried in simple amazement, "whatever are you talking of?"

She repeated her apologia, though in less coherent terms. She felt foolish, as a girl does when a carefully prepared expression of feeling falls upon ears which, though inexpressibly dear, are nevertheless not quite comprehending.

"You have had to do pot-boilers," she said, falling into miserable bathos, "and I remember the five-shillings-a-dozen landscapes — and you would have spent all that time on your real work — Oh, don't you see what I mean, Jimmie?"

She looked up at him pathetically — she was a slight slip of a girl, and he was above the medium height. He smiled and took her fresh young face between his hands.

"My dear," he said, "you 're the only successful piece of work I 've ever turned out in my life. Please allow me to have some artistic satisfaction — and you have been worth a gold-mine to me."

Thus each was comforted. Jimmie settled down to his pipe and a book, Aline sat over her sewing — the articles to which she devoted her perennial industry were a never solved mystery to him — and they spent a pleasant evening. The inevitable topic naturally arose in conversation. They discussed the princess's visit, the great question — how was she to be received?

"The best thing you can do," said the practical Aline, "is to go to Mrs. Deering to-morrow and get properly coached."

Jimmie looked at her in admiration.

"You are worth your weight in diamonds," he said. "I will."

He carried out his project, and not only did he have the pleasure of finding Connie at home undisturbed by strange tea-drinking women, but Norma Hardacre came in soon after his arrival. The two ladies formed themselves into a committee of advice, and sent Jimmie home with most definite notions regarding the correct method of receiving Serene Highnesses. He also brought Aline the news that the committee would honour him with a visit the following morning, accompanied by Mrs. Hardacre, who had been pleased to express a desire to see his pictures.

The appointed hour came, and with it the ladies. Mrs. Hardacre's lips smiled sweetly at the man who was to be taken up by a duchess and to paint the portrait of a princess. She declared herself delighted with the studio and professed admiration for the pictures.

"Are they all really your own, Mr. Padgate?" she asked, turning towards him, her tortoise-shell lorgnon held sceptre-wise.

"I'm afraid so," answered Jimmie, with a smile. "Sometimes I wish they were not so much my own."

"But I should feel quite proud of them, if I were you," said the lady, desirous to please.

Connie broke into a laugh, and explained that Jimmie had implied a regret that they had found no purchasers. Mrs. Hardacre sniffed. She did not like being laughed at, especially as she had gone out of her way to be urbane. This was unfortunate for Jimmie; for though he strove hard to remove the impression that he had consciously dug a pit of ridicule for her entrapment, Mrs. Hardacre listened to his remarks with suspicion and became painfully aware

of the shabbiness of his coat. Presently she regarded one of the portraits — that of a pretty, fluffy-haired woman.

"Dear me," she remarked somewhat frigidly, "that is Mrs. Marmaduke Hewson."

Jimmie, in the simplicity of his heart, was delighted.

"Yes. A most charming lady. Do you know her?"

"Oh, no; I don't know her, but I know of her."

Her stress on the preposition signified even deeper and more far-reaching things than the nod of Lord Burleigh in the play.

"What do you know of her?" asked Jimmie, bluntly.

Mrs. Hardacre smiled frostily, and her lean shoulders moved in an imperceptible shrug.

"Those matters belong to the realm of unhappy gossip, Mr. Padgate; but I'm afraid the duchess won't find her portrait attractive."

"It is really rather a good portrait," said Jimmie, in puzzled modesty.

"That is the pity of it," replied Mrs. Hardacre, sweetly.

The victim smiled. "Surely the private character of the subject can have nothing to do with a person's judgment of a portrait as a specimen of the painter's art. And besides, Mrs. Hewson is as dear and sweet and true a little woman as I have ever met."

"You are not the first of your sex that has said so."

"And I most sincerely hope I shall not be the last," said Jimmie, with a little flush and a little flash in his eyes and the politest of little bows. Whereupon Mrs. Hardacre bit her lip and hated him. Norma, seizing the opportunity of contributing to the final rout of her mother, unwittingly did Jimmie some damage.

"We women ought not to have given up fancy work,"

she said in her hardest and most artificial tones. "As we don't embroider with our fingers, we embroider with our tongues. You can have no idea what an elaborate tissue of lies has been woven about that poor little Mrs. Hewson. I agree with Mr. Padgate. I am sorry you believe them, mother."

Jimmie's grateful glance smote her undeserving heart. She had gained credit under false pretences and felt hypocritical — an unpleasant feeling, for the assumption of unpossessed virtues was not one of her faults. She succeeded, however, in rendering her mother furious. In a very short time Mrs. Hardacre remembered an engagement and went away in a hansom-cab, refusing the seat in Connie's carriage, which was put at her disposal on the condition of her waiting a few moments longer. She had thanked Jimmie, however, for the pleasure afforded by his delightful pictures with such politeness when he saw her into the cab, that he did not for a moment suspect that the lady who had entered the house with expressions of friendliness had driven away in a rage, with feelings towards him iudicrously hostile. He returned to the studio at peace with all womankind; not sorry that Mrs. Hardacre had departed, but only because courtesy no longer demanded his relegating to the second sphere of his attention the divine personage of whom he felt himself to be the slave. No suspicion of Mrs. Hardacre's spiteful motive in deprecating the display of his most striking piece of portraiture ever entered his head. He ran down the studio stairs with the eagerness of a boy released from the flattering but embarrassing society of his elders and free to enjoy the companionship of his congeners. And he was childishly eager to show his pictures to Norma, to hear her verdict, to secure

her approval, so that he should stand in her eyes as a person in some humble way worthy of the regard that Morland said she bestowed on him.

He found his visitors not looking at pictures at all, but talking to Aline, who rushed to him as soon as he entered the studio.

"Oh, Jimmie — just fancy! Mrs. Deering is going to take me to Horlingham on Saturday, and is coming upstairs with me to see what I can do in the way of a frock. You don't mind, do you?"

Jimmie looked down into the happy young face and laughed a happy laugh.

"Mrs. Deering is an angel from the most exclusive part of heaven," he said. And this was one of the rare occasions on which he was guilty of a double meaning. Had not the angel thus contrived an unlooked-for joy — a few minutes' undisturbed communion with his divinity?

The first words that Norma spoke when they were alone were an apology.

"You must not take what my mother said in ill part. She and I have been bred, I'm afraid, in a hard school."

"It was very kind of Mrs. Hardacre to warn me of the possibility of the duchess being prejudiced against me by the exhibition of a particular portrait. I can't conceive the possibility myself. But still Mrs. Hardacre's intention was kindly."

Norma turned her head away for a moment. She could not trust herself to speak, for a stinging sarcasm with just a touch of the hysterical would have been all she could utter, and she had not the heart to undeceive him. She shot into the by-path of the gossip concerning Mrs. Hewson.

"Mother believes the stories about her. So do I in the loose sort of way in which our faith in anything is composed — even in our fellow-creatures' failings."

"You defended her," said Jimmie.

"You made me do so."

"I?"

"Either you, because you carry about with you an uncomfortable Palace of Truth sort of atmosphere, or else the desire to rub it into my mother."

"Rub what in?" Jimmie was puzzled.

Norma laughed somewhat bitterly. She saw that he was incapable of understanding the vulgar pettiness of the scheme of motives that had prompted the utterances of her mother and herself. She could not explain.

"I think you are born out of your century," she said.

It was lucky for Jimmie that he was unaware of the passionate tribute the light words implied. She gave him no time to answer, but carried him straight to the pictures.

"I had no idea you did such beautiful work," she said, looking around her.

Jimmie followed her glance, and the melancholy of the artist laid its touch for a moment upon him. He sighed.

"They might have been beautiful if I had done what I started out to do. It is the eternal tragedy of the clipped wings."

She was oddly responsive to a vibration in his voice, and gave out, like a passive violin, the harmonic of the struck note.

"Better to have wings that are clipped than to have no wings at all."

She had never uttered such a sentiment, never thought

such a thought in her life before. Her words sounded unreal in her own ears, and yet she had a profound sense of their sincerity.

"There is no apteryx among human souls," said Jimmie, released from the melancholy fingers. They argued the point in a lighter vein, discussed individual pictures. Charmed by her sympathy, he spoke freely of his work, his motives, his past dreams. Had Norma not begun to know him, she might have wondered at the lack of bitterness in his talk. To this man of many struggles and many crushing disappointments the world was still young and sweet, and his faith in the ultimate righteousness of things undimmed. The simple courage of his attitude towards life moved her admiration. She felt somewhat humbled in the presence of a spirit stronger, clearer than any into which chance had hitherto afforded her a glimpse. And as he talked in his bright, half-earnest, half-humourous way, it crossed her mind that there was a fair world of thought and emotion in which she and her like had not set their feet; not the world entirely of poetic and artistic imaginings, but one where inner things mattered more than outer circumstance, where it would not be ridiculous or affected to think of the existence of a soul and its needs and their true fulfilment.

Hitherto meeting him as an alien in her world, she had regarded him with a touch of patronising pity. From this she was now free. She saw him for the first time in harmony with his environment, as the artist sensitive and responsive, integral with the beautiful creations that hung around the walls, and still homely and simple, bearing the rubs of time as bravely and frankly as the old drawing-room suite that furnished the unpretentious studio. Now it was she

who felt herself somewhat disconcertingly out of her element. The sensation, however, had a curious charm.

There was one picture that had attracted her from the first. She stood in front of it moved by its pity and tenderness.

"Tell me about this one," she said without looking at him. She divined that it was very near his heart.

In the foreground amid laughing woodland crouched a faun with little furry ears and stumps of horns, and he was staring in piteous terror at a vision; and the vision was that of a shivering, outcast woman on a wet pavement in a sordid street.

"It is the joyous, elemental creature's first conception of pain," said Jimmie, after a few moments' silence. "You see, life has been to him only the sunshine, and the earth drenched with colour and music — as the earth ought to be — and now he sees a world that is coming grey with rain and misty with tears, and he has the horror of it in his eyes. I am not given to such moralising in paint," he added with a smile. "This is a very early picture." He looked at it for some time with eyes growing wistful. "Yes," he sighed, "I did it many years ago."

"It has a history then?"

"Yes," he admitted; and he remembered how the outcast figure in the rain had symbolised that little funeral procession in Paris and how terribly grey the world had been.

Norma's chastened mood had not awed the spirit of mockery within her, but had rendered it less bitter, and had softened her voice. She waved her hand towards the croucning faun.

"And that is you?" she asked.

Jimmie caught a kind raillery in her glance, and laughed. Yes, she had his secret; was the only person who had ever guessed him beneath the travesty of horns and goat's feet.

"I like you for laughing," she said.

"Why?"

"Other painters have shown me their pictures."

"Which signifies —?"

"That this is one of the most beautiful pictures I have ever seen," she replied.

"But why are you glad that I laughed?" asked Jimmie, in happy puzzledom.

"I have told you, Mr. Padgate, all that I am going to tell you."

"I accept the inscrutable," said he.

"Do you believe in the old pagan joy of life?" she asked after a pause. "I mean, was there, is there such a thing? One has heard of it; in fact it is a catch phrase that any portentous poseur has on the tip of his tongue. When one comes to examine it, however, it generally means champagne and oysters and an unpresentable lady, and it ends with liver and — and all sorts of things, don't you know. But you are not a poseur — I think you are the honestest man I have ever met — and yet you paint this creature as if you utterly believe in what he typifies."

"It would go hard with me if I did n't," said Jimmie. "I can't talk to you in philosophic terms and explain all my reasons, because I have read very little philosophy. When I do try, my head gets addled. I knew a chap once who used to devour Berkeley and Kant and all the rest, and used to write about them, and I used to sit at his feet in a kind of awed wonder at the tremendousness of his brain. A man called Smith. He was colossally clever," he added

after a reflective pause. "But I can only grope after the obvious. Don't you think the beauty of the world is obvious?"

"It all depends upon which world," said Norma.

"Which world? Why, God's world. It is sweet to draw the breath of life. I love living; don't you?"

"I have never thought of it," she answered. "I should n't like to die, it is true, but I don't know why. Most people seem to spend two-thirds of their existence in a state of boredom, and the rest in sleep."

"That is because they reject my poor faun's inheritance."

"I have been asking you what that is."

"The joy and laughter of life. They put it from them."

"How?"

"They draw the soul's curtains and light the gas, instead of letting God's sunshine stream in."

Norma turned away from the picture with a laugh.

"That reminds me of the first time I met you. You told me to go and ventilate my soul. It gave me quite a shock, I assure you. But I have been trying to follow your precept ever since. Don't you think I am a little bit fresher?"

For the moment the girl still lingering in her five-and-twenty hard years flashed to the surface, adorably warming the cold, finely sculptured face, and bringing rare laughter into her eyes. Jimmie marvelled at the infinite sweetness of her, and fed his poor hungry soul thereon.

"You look like a midsummer morning," he said unsteadily.

The tone caught her, sobered her; but the colour deepened on her cheek.

"I 'll treasure that as a pretty compliment," she said.

There was a little space of silence—quite a perilous little space, with various unsaid things lurking in ambush. Norma broke it first.

"Now I have seen everything, have n't I? No. There are some on the floor against the wall."

Jimmie explained their lack of value, showed her two or three. They were mostly the wasters from his picture factory, he said. She found in each a subject for admiration, and Jimmie glowed with pleasure at her praise. While he was replacing them she moved across the studio.

"And this one?" she asked, with her finger on the top of a strainer. He looked round and followed swiftly to her side. It was her own portrait with its face to the wall.

"I am not going to show you that," he said hurriedly.

"Why not?"

"It 's a crazy thing."

"I should love to see it."

"I tell you it 's a crazy thing," he repeated. "A mad artist's dream."

Norma arched her eyebrows. "Aha! That is very like a confession!"

"Of what?"

"The ideal woman?"

"Perhaps," he said.

"I thought everything was so positive in your scheme of life," she remarked teasingly. "Don't you know?"

"Yes," said Jimmie, "I know."

Again the vibration that Jimmie, poorest of actors, could not keep from his voice, stirred her. She felt the indelicacy

of having trodden upon sanctified ground. She turned away and sat down. They talked of other matters, somewhat self-consciously. Both welcomed the entrance of Connie Deering and Aline. The former filled the studio at once with laughing chatter. She hoped Norma had not turned Jimmie's hair white with the dreadful things she must have said.

"I don't turn a hair, as I 'm a mere worldling, but Jimmie is an unsophisticated child of nature, and is n't accustomed to you, my dear Norma."

She went on to explain that she was Jimmie's natural protectress, and that they who harmed him would have to reckon with her. Jimmie flew gaily to Norma's defence.

"And this child's garments?" he asked, indicating Aline, whose face was irradiated by a vision of splendid attire.

"Don't meddle with what does n't concern you," replied Connie, while she and the girl exchanged the glances of conspirators.

A short while afterwards the two visitors drove away. For some time Norma responded somewhat absently to Mrs. Deering's light talk.

"I am so glad you have taken to Jimmie," said the latter at last. "Is n't he a dear?"

"I remember your saying that before. But is n't it rather an odd word to use with reference to him?" said Norma.

"Odd — ? But that 's just what he is."

Norma turned in some resentment on her friend.

"Oh, Connie, how dare we talk patronisingly of a man like that? He 's worth a thousand of the empty-souled, bridge-playing people we live among."

"But that's just why I call him a dear," said Mrs. Deering, uncomprehendingly.

Norma shrugged her shoulders, fell into a silence which she broke by asking:

"Do you know whom he is in love with?"

"Good gracious, Norma," cried the little lady, in alarm. "You don't say that Jimmie is in love? Oh, it would spoil him. He can't be!"

"There was one picture — of a woman — which he would not let me see," said Norma.

"Well?"

Norma paused for some seconds before she replied:

"He called it 'a mad artist's dream.' I have been wondering whether it was not better than a sane politician's reality."

"What is a sane politician's reality, dear?" Connie asked, mystified.

"I am," said Norma.

Then, woman-like, she turned the conversation to the turpitudes of her dressmaker.

Chapter X

TWO IDYLLS

JIMMIE was trudging along the undulating highroad that leads from Dieppe to the little village of Berneval, very hot, very dusty, very thirsty, and very contented. He carried a stick and a little black bag. His content proceeded from a variety of causes. In the first place it was a glorious August day, drenched with sunshine and with deep blue ether; and the smiling plain of Normandy rolled before him, a land of ripening orchards and lazy pastures. He had been longing for the simple beauty of sun and sky and green trees, and for the homely sights and sounds of country things, and now he had his fill. Secondly, Aline was having a much needed holiday. She had been growing a little pale and languid, he thought, in London, after a year's confined administering to his selfish wants. She was enjoying herself, too, and the few days she had already spent in the sea air had brought the blood to her cheeks again. Thirdly, he was free for the moment from every-day cares. A dealer had fallen from heaven into his studio and paid money down for the copyright of two of his worst pictures. Fourthly, he had definitely received the commission for the portrait of the Princess of Herren-Rothbeck. Her Serene Highness and her tutelary duchess had paid their visit, expressed themselves delighted with his work (the duchess especially commending the portrait of the

hapless Mrs. Marmaduke Hewson), and had driven away in a most satisfactory condition of serenity and graciousness.

Jimmie was happy. What could man want more? In addition to all these blessings, Norma had written to him from Lord Monzie's place in Scotland a letter *à propos* of nothing, merely expressive of good-will and friendliness; and he had received it that morning. He had never seen her handwriting before. Bold, incisive, distinguished, it seemed to complement his conception of the radiant lady, and in a foolish way he tried to harmonise the ink-marks with the curves of her proud lips, the setting of her eyes, and the poise of her queenly head. The dreariness of a rainy afternoon with all the men and half the women away on the grouse-moor had been, she said, her excuse for writing. She sketched various members of the house-party with light, satiric touches; notably one Theodore Weever, an American, whose sister had married an impecunious and embarrassing cousin of the Duchess of Wiltshire. He was building himself a palace in Fifth Avenue, wrote Norma, and had been buying pictures in Europe to decorate it with; now he was anxious to purchase a really decorative wife. Morland was expected in a few days, and she would be glad when he appeared upon the scene. She did not say why; but Jimmie naturally understood that her heart was yearning for the presence of the man she loved. "I have very little to say that can interest you," she concluded, "but you can say many things to interest me: this letter is purely selfish, a mere minnow, after all, that I use as bait." So Jimmie walked along the dusty road thinking out an answer that could bring comfort to the Hero pining for her Leander; thinking also of Aline, and revelling in the sunshine.

He delighted, like a child, in all he saw. He stopped before the red, gold, and green paradise of an orchard and feasted upon its colour. He lingered in talk with a tiny girl driving a great brown cow; asked her its age, how many calves it had had, its name, and whether she were not afraid it would mistake her for a blade of grass and bite her. The little girl scoffed at the possibility. She could drive three cows, and, if it came to that, a bull. "*Ça me connaît, les bêtes*," she said. Whereupon he put a couple of sous in her hand and went on his way. Presently he sat down on the rough wooden bench in front of a wayside café and drank cider from an earthenware bowl, and played with a mongrel puppy belonging to the establishment. When the latter had darted off to bark amid the cloud of dust and petroleum fumes left by a passing motor-car, Jimmie, sipping his second bowl of sour cider in great content, re-read the precious letter, filled his pipe, and reflected peacefully on the great harmony of things. The hopelessness of his own love for Norma struck no discord. The Stephen so closely connected with the life of Saint Catherine of Siena did not love with less hope or more devotion.

He paid the few coppers for his reckoning, took up his stick and little black bag, and trudged on refreshed, and as he neared Berneval the expectation of Aline's welcome gladdened him. He had rented for the month a cottage with a straggling piece of ground behind, from an artist friend whose possession it was. The friend had fixed the figure absurdly low; the modest living under Aline's experienced management was cheap, and the *bonne à tout faire* cooked divinely for a few halfpence a day. By a curious coincidence Mr. Anthony Merewether had also pitched upon Berneval as a summer resting-place. He

had come on business, he gave out, and every morning saw him issue from the hotel by the beach, armed with easel and camp-stool, and the rest of the landscape-painter's paraphernalia, and every evening saw him smoking cigarettes on Jimmie's veranda. Whether the hours of sunshine saw him consistently hard at work, Jimmie was inclined to doubt. He certainly bathed a great deal and ran about with Aline a great deal, and Jimmie read the pair moral lessons on the evil effects of idleness. But Tony was a fresh-minded boy; his ingenuous conversation provided Jimmie with much entertainment, and his presence on their holiday gave him the satisfaction of feeling that Aline had some one of her own age to play with.

The ramshackle vehicle, half diligence, half omnibus, that plies between Berneval and Dieppe, passed him with great cracking of whip and straining of rusty harness and loud *hue*'s from the driver, just as he entered the village. It was late afternoon, and the trim white and green of the place was bathed in mellow sunshine. The short cut home lay up a lane and through the churchyard, a cluster of grey slabs around a little grey church; and many of the slabs bore the story of the pitiless sea — how Jean-Marie Dulac, many years ago, was drowned at the age of nineteen, and how Jacques Lemerre perished in a storm; for it has been from time immemorial a tiny village of fisher-folk and every family has given of its own to the waves. The pathos of the simple legends on the stones always touched him as he walked by; and now he paused to decipher some moss-grown letters of fifty years ago. He stooped, made out the same sad tale, moralised a little thereon, and rose with a sigh of relief to greet the sunshine and the fair earth. But the sight that suddenly met his eyes banished dead

fishermen and hungry sea and sunny tree-tops from his mind. It was a boy and a girl very close together, his arm about her waist, her head upon his shoulder, walking by the little church. Their backs were towards him. He stared open-mouthed.

"God bless my soul!" said he, in amazement.

Then he dropped his stick, which clattered upon a grave-stone.

The foolish pair started at the sound, assumed a correct attitude with remarkable swiftness, and turning, recognised Jimmie. Tony Merewether, who was a fair youth, grew very red and looked sheepish; Aline awaited events demurely, with downcast eyes. Jimmie pushed his old Homburg hat to the back of his head, and in two or three strides confronted them. He tried to look fiercely at Tony. The young man drew himself up.

"I have asked Aline to marry me, sir," he said frankly. "I was going to speak to you about it."

"Good Lord!" said Jimmie, helplessly.

"We can't marry just yet," said Tony, "but I hope you will give your consent."

Jimmie looked from one to the other.

"Why didn't you let me know of this state of things before?"

"I haven't done anything underhand. I thought you guessed," said Tony.

"And you, Aline?"

She stole a shy glance at him.

"I wasn't quite sure of it until just now," she replied. And then she blushed furiously and ran to Jimmie's arms. "Oh, Jimmie dear, don't be cross!"

"Cross, my child?" he said.

The world of tender reproach in his tone touched her. The ready tears started.

"You are an angel, Jimmie."

The hand that was on her shoulder patted it comfortingly.

"No, dear, I am a blind elderly idiot. O Lord, Tony, I hope you feel infernally ashamed of yourself."

"As Tony says, we sha'n't be able to get married for a long, long time," said Aline, by way of consolation, "so for years and years we'll go on in just the same way."

"I only ask you to consent to our engagement, sir," said Tony, diplomatically. "I am quite willing to wait for Aline as long as you like."

The abandonment of Jimmie by Aline had been the subject of the last half-hour's discussion between the lovers. The thought of Jimmie alone and helpless appalled her. She was a horrid selfish wretch, she had informed Tony, for listening to a word he said. How could Jimmie live by himself? She shuddered at the dismal chaos of the studio, the gaping holes in his socks, the impossible meals, the fleecing of him by every plausible beggar in frock coat or rags, the empty treasury. He needed more care than a baby. She would marry Tony, some day, because her head was full of him, and because she had let him kiss her and had found a peculiar, dreamy happiness during the process, and because she could not conceive the possibility of marrying any one else. But she was more than content to leave the date indefinite. Perhaps, in the stretch of æons between now and then, something would happen to release her from her responsibilities. She had made the position luminously clear to Mr. Merewether before she

had consented to be foolish and walk about with her head on his shoulder.

"No, until Jimmie gets properly suited," she said, quickly following Tony's last remark.

"My dear foolish children," said Jimmie, "you had better get married as soon as ever you can keep the wolf from the door. What on earth is the good of waiting till you are old? Get all the happiness you can out of your youth, and God bless you."

The young man bowed his head.

"I will give my life to her."

Jimmie touched him on the arm, waved his hand around, indicating the little grey church, the quiet graves.

"This is not the place where a man should say such a thing lightly," he said.

"I am not the man to say such a thing lightly in any place," retorted the youth, with spirit.

Jimmie nodded approvingly. "My dear," he said to Aline, "that is the way I like to hear a man talk."

He turned and collected the fallen stick and the black bag which he had deposited by the side of the slab. He had gone into Dieppe that morning partly for the sake of the walk and partly to purchase some odds and ends for the house. Aline, not trusting to his memory, had given him a list of items with directions attached as to the places where he was to procure them, so that when he came to "pepper," he should seek it at a grocery and not at a milliner's establishment. Now, without saying a word, he opened the bag and rummaged among its queer contents, which Aline regarded with some twinges of a tender conscience. She ought to have gone into Dieppe herself, and made her purchases like a notable housewife, instead of

sending Jimmie and passing the day in selfish lovemaking. The twinge grew sharper when Jimmie at last fished out a little cardboard box and put it in her hands.

"At any rate, I can give you an engagement present before Tony," he said with a laugh.

It was only an old filigree silver waist-buckle he had picked up at a curio shop in the town, but it was a gem of infinite value to the girl, for she knew that Jimmie's love went with it. She showed it to Tony Merewether, who admired the workmanship.

"If you can give me anything I shall prize more, you will be a lucky fellow," she said in a low voice.

The three strolled quietly towards the cottage, and it was Jimmie's arm that Aline clung to, and Mr. Merewether who carried the black bag. That night, after she had dismissed the young man, she sat a long time with Jimmie on the veranda, telling him in one shy breath of the wonder that had suddenly come into her life, and in the next that she would never leave him until he was rich and famous and able to live by himself. Jimmie, unguileful in the nature of men and maidens and the ways of this wicked world, kept on repeating like a refrain his formula of astonishment:

"It never entered my head, dear, that you two children would fall in love with one another."

"You don't think I ought n't to have done it, do you, Jimmie?" she said at last.

He broke into his happy laugh, and kissed her. "If you want to please me, you 'll go on doing it," he said.

It was some time after he had gone to bed that sleep came. Yes; Nature, the dear mother, had spoken, and who could gainsay her? A clean, bright, healthy English lad, and a clean, bright, healthy English girl had read truth

in each other's eyes. It was one of the sweet things in the world, for which we who live in the world should be thankful. The dimly seen white curtains of his bed became gossamer veils that enveloped him with beauty. Now, on either side, his inner life was touched by the magic of romance: the fair dream of these two children, and the love of the other betrothed pair. It was on happy eyelids that sleep settled at last. And Aline, too, lay awake, her young cheeks burning at the delicious yet affrighting memory of a kiss in the little churchyard, and her heart swelling at the thought of the infinite goodness of Jimmie.

Meanwhile, unconscious of these idyllic happenings and romantic speculations, Norma was enjoying herself in her worldly way at Lord Monzie's place in Scotland. Lord Monzie, a dissipated young man who had lately come into the title, had married a well-to-do young woman in very smart society. Consequently there was no lack of modern entertainment in the house. So modern was everything that the host had got down Mr. Joseph Ascherberg, the financier, to hold a roulette bank every night against all comers; but he took care that he himself, or his own confidential man, turned the wheel and spun the marble. Most of the people had unimaginative nicknames, the extremes of the Submerged Tenth and the Upper Ten thus curiously meeting. Lord Monzie was called "Muggins;" his bosom friend, and, as some whispered, his *âme damnée*, Sir Calthrop Boyle, was alluded to as "The Boiler;" and Ascherberg responded to the appellation of "Freddy." There were also modern conveniences for the gratification of caprices or predilections that need not be insisted upon. In fact the atmosphere was surcharged with modernity; so

much so that Norma, who would have walked about the Suburra of Imperial Rome with cynical indifference, gasped a little when she entered it. One or two things actually shocked her, at which she wondered greatly. She regarded Mr. Ascherberg with extreme disfavour, and winced at the women's conversation when they were cosily free from men. For the first day or two she held herself somewhat apart, preferring solitude on sequestered bits of terrace, where she could read a novel, or look at the grey hills that met the stretch of purple moorland. But gradually the sweeter tone of mind which she had brought with her lost its flavour, and having won sixty pounds from Ascherberg, and having told the feminine coterie what she knew of the Wyniard affair, she began to breathe the atmosphere without much difficulty. Yet occasionally she had spasms of revolt. In a corner of the drawing-room stood a marble copy of the little Laughing Faun in the Louvre, put there by the late baron, and every time her eye fell upon it, the picture of another faun arose before her, and with it the memory of a homely man with bright kind eyes, and she seemed to draw a breath of purer air. But she called the fancy foolishness and hardened her heart.

Still, had it not been for Theodore Weever, the American man of affairs, she would probably have found some pretext for an abrupt departure. He alone was a personality among the characterless, vicious men and women of the house-party. Short, spare, alert, bald-headed, clean-shaven, clear-featured, he was of a type apart. Norma, who had a keen intelligence, divined in him from the first an adversary upon whom she could sharpen her wit and a companion who would not bore her with dreary tales of sport or the unprofitable details of his last night's play. And from

the first Theodore Weever was attracted towards Norma. Their lax associates, in spite of her engagement to Morland being perfectly well known and in spite of Morland's expected arrival, recognised their pairing with embarrassing frankness, and said appalling things about them behind their backs. For a few days therefore they found themselves inseparable. At last their friendship reached the confidential stage. Mr. Theodore Weever avowed the object of his present visit to England. He was in search of a decorative wife.

"It ought to be as easy as turning over a book of wall-papers," said Norma.

"And as difficult to choose," said he.

"You must know what scheme of colouring and design you want."

"Precisely. I don't find it in the books of stock patterns, either here or in America. And I've ransacked America."

"Is n't the line — I believe in commercial circles they call it a line — is n't the line of specially selected duchesses for the English market good enough for you?" she asked with a smile.

He was about to light a cigarette when she began her question. He lit it and blew out the first few puffs of smoke before he replied. They were sitting in Norma's favourite nook on the terrace, where he, solitary male who had not gone forth with a gun that morning, had been gratuitously told by an obliging hostess that he would find her.

"The American woman makes a good decorative duchess," he said in his incisive tone, "because she has to sweep herself clean of every tradition she was born with

and accept bodily the very much bigger and more dazzling tradition of your old aristocracy. She can do it, because she is infinitely sensitive and intelligent. But she is a changed creature. She has to live up to her duke."

He puffed for a moment or two at his cigarette.

"Do you see what I am coming to?" he continued. "I am not an English duke. I am a plain American citizen. No woman in America would make it her ideal in life to live up to me."

"I don't mean to be rude," interrupted Norma, with a laugh, "but do you think any Englishwoman would?"

"I do," he replied. "Not to this insignificant, bald-headed thing that is I, but to what in the way of position and power I represent. An American woman would bring her traditions along with her — her superior culture, her natural right to be enthroned as queen, her expectation that I would take a back seat in my own house. It is I that would become a sort of grotesque decoration in the place. Now, I may be grotesque, but I will not consent to be decorative. I fully intend to be master. I am not going to be Mrs. Theodore Weever's husband. I want an Englishwoman to bring along her traditions. She will be naturally *grande dame;* she will come to my house, my social world, frankly the wife of Theodore Weever, and ready to support the dignity, whatever it may be, of Theodore Weever, just as she would have supported the dignity of Lord So and So, had she been married to him in England."

"You will find thousands of English girls who can do that," said Norma. "I don't see your difficulty."

"She must be decorative," said Weever.

"And that means?"

"She must be a queenly woman, but one content to be queen consort. Your queenly woman — with brains — is not so easy to find. I have met only one in my life who is beyond all my dreams of the ideal. Of course the inherent malice of things screws her down like one blade of a pair of scissors to another fellow."

"Who is the paragon?" asked Norma.

"It would n't be fair on the other fellow to tell you," said he.

"Is it sheer honesty, or the fear of being cut in half by the pair of scissors that keeps you from coming between them?"

"I think it's honesty," he replied. "If I can guess rightly, the scissors have n't so fine an edge on them as to make them dangerous."

"They may be desperately in love with one another, for all you know."

"They are delightful worldlings of our own particular world, dear lady," said Weever, with a smile.

Thus was Norma given to understand that the post of decorative queen consort in Mr. Theodore Weever's Fifth Avenue palace was at her disposal. A year ago she might have considered the offer seriously; now that she felt secure of a brilliant position as Morland's wife, she was amused by its frank impudence. She held other laughing conversations with him on the subject of his search, but, too prudent to commit indiscretions, she gave no hint that she had understood his personal allusion, and Weever was too shrewd to proceed any further towards his own undoing. They remained paired, however, to their mutual satisfaction, until Morland's arrival, when Theodore Weever took his departure. In fact, the same carriage that conveyed the

American to the station remained for a necessary half-hour to meet Morland's train, and Norma, who dutifully drove down to welcome her affianced, shared the carriage with the departing guest.

She stood on the platform chatting with him as he leaned out of the window.

"When shall we see each other again?" she said idly.

"Next month."

"Where?" she asked, somewhat taken aback by his decided tone.

"I am putting in some time at Chiltern Towers. I had a letter this morning from the duchess, asking me to come and meet the Princess of Herren-Rothbeck."

They looked at each other, and Norma laughed.

"Beware of Her Serene Highness."

"Oh, I 've had dealings with her before," replied Weever. "I reckon I get my money's worth. Don't you fret about me."

The guard came up and touched his cap.

"We are off now, miss."

She shook hands with Weever, saying with a laugh, "I hope you will find that bit of decoration."

"Don't you fret about that, either," he said with a quick, hard glance. "I 'm in no hurry. I can wait."

The train started, and was soon swallowed by a tunnel a few hundred yards up the line. Norma patrolled the platform of the little wayside station waiting for Morland. The place was very still. The only porter had departed somewhither. The station-master had retired into his office. The coachman outside the station sat like a well-bred image on his box, and the occasional clink of the harness, as the horses threw up their heads, sounded sharp

and clear. Nothing around but mountain and moorland; a short distance in front a ravine with a lazily trickling, half-dried-up mountain stream. Here and there a clump of larch and fir, and a rough granite boulder. An overcast sky threw dreariness on the silent waste. Norma shivered, suddenly struck with a sense of isolation. She seemed to stand in the same relation with her soul's horizon as with the physical universe. The man that had gone had left her with a little feeling of fear for the future, a little after-taste of bitterness. The man that was coming would bring her no thrill of joy. As she stood between a drab sky and a bleak earth, so stood she utterly alone in the still pause between a past and a future equally unillumined. She longed for the sun to break out of the heaven, for the sounds of joyous things to come from plain and mountain; and she longed for light and song in her heart.

She had been watching for the past few days the proceedings of a half-recognised, irregular union. The woman was the frivolous, heartless, almost passionless wife of a casual husband at the other end of the earth; the man an underbred fellow on the stock exchange. She ordered him about and called him Tommy. He clothed her in extravagant finery, and openly showed her his sovereign male's contempt. Norma had overheard him tell her to go to the devil and leave him alone, when she hinted one night, in a whisper that was meant for his ears alone, that he was drinking overmuch whisky. It was all so sordid, so vulgar — the bond between them so unsanctified by anything like tenderness, chivalry, devotion. Norma had felt the revulsion of her sex.

What would be the future? By any chance like this woman's life? Would the day come when she would

sell herself for a gown and a bracelet, thrown at her with a man's contemptuous word? Was marriage very widely different from such a union? Was not she selling herself? Might not the man she was waiting for go the way of so many others of his type, drink and coarsen and tell her to go to the devil?

She longed for the sun, but not a gleam pierced the leaden sky; she sought in her soul for a ray of light, but none came.

At last with a shriek and a billowing plume of smoke the down train emerged from the tunnel. Norma set her face in its calm ironic mask and waited for the train to draw up. Only two passengers alighted, Morland and his man. Morland came to her with smiling looks and grasped her by the hand.

"You are looking more beautiful than ever," he whispered, bringing his face close to hers.

She started back as if she had been struck. The fumes of brandy were in his breath. Her hideous forebodings were in process of fulfilment.

"The whole station will hear you," she said coldly, turning away.

The Imp of Mischance rubbed his hands gleefully at his contrivance. Morland, a temperate man, had merely felt chilly after an all-night's journey, and, more out of idleness than from a desire for alcohol, had foolishly taken a sip out of his brandy flask a moment or two before, when he was putting up his hand-bag.

Norma collected herself, summoned with bitter cynicism her common-sense to her aid, and made smiling amends for her shrewish remark. She suffered him to kiss her on the drive home, and strove not to despise herself.

Chapter XI

DANGER

HEDDON COURT had been purchased by a wealthy Hardacre at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and was exhibited by his grand-nephew, the present occupant, as a gem of Georgian architecture. Mr. Hardacre had but a vague idea what the definition meant, but it sounded very impressive. As a matter of fact, it was a Palladian stone building, with pediments over the windows and severe rustication on the lower courses. As none of the succeeding Hardacres had any money to devote to extensions, the building had remained in its original perfection of formality, and Mr. Hardacre did well to be proud of it. The grounds had been laid out in the Italian style; but the tastes and fashions of over a hundred years had caused the classic architect's design to be practically indiscernible. A lawn with trim flower-beds, bounded by an arc of elm-trees and bordered by a circular carriage drive faced the south front. Along the east front ran a series of terraces. The highest, a foot or two below the level of the drawing-room floor, ended on the north in a porticoed temple, now used as an afternoon lounge, and incongruously furnished with rugs and frivolous wickerwork chairs and tables. The next terrace, some eight feet below, was devoted to a tennis court. A thick hedge of clipped yew and a screen of wire netting hid

the lowest, the most charming of all, which, surrounded on all sides by a sloping bank and flanked on three sides by tall trees, had been delicately turfed for a bowling-green and was now used for croquet.

In this stately paradise, warmed by sunny September weather, Jimmie had already spent two or three blissful days. His only regret was the absence of Aline. She had been invited, but for reasons in which doubtless Tony Merewether had a place, she had declined the invitation. She gave Jimmie to understand that she had already had her holiday, that the house could not possibly look after itself any longer, and that she had no clothes fit to appear in among his grand friends. The last argument being unanswerable, save by contentions at which the young woman tossed a superior head, Jimmie had yielded and come down alone. His regret, however, was tempered by the reflection that Aline was probably enjoying herself after the manner of betrothed maidens, and it did not seriously affect his happiness. Either chance or the lady's own sweet courtesy towards a guest had caused him to see much of Norma. She had driven him over to Chiltern Towers, where the sittings had begun. She had walked with him to Cosford to show him the beautiful fourteenth-century church with its decorated spire. She had strolled with him up and down the croquet lawn. She had chatted with him in the morning-room yesterday for a whole rainy hour after lunch. His head was full of her beauty and condescension. It was not unnatural that they should be thrown much together. Morland's day was taken up by partridges and electors. Mr. Hardacre, honestly afraid of Jimmie, not knowing what on earth to talk to him about, and only half comprehending his conversation, kept out of

his way as much as his duties as host would allow, and Mrs. Hardacre, who, though exceedingly civil, had not forgotten her defeat in the studio, felt justified in leaving his entertainment in the hands of others who professed to admire the creature. These were Norma, Morland, and Connie Deering.

This afternoon they found themselves again alone together, at tea in the classic temple at the end of the terrace. Mrs. Hardacre and Connie had driven off to pay a call, and the men were shooting over ducal turnips. Jimmie had received an invitation to join the shooting-party, but not having handled a gun since boyish days (and even then Jimmie with firearms was Morland's conception of the terror that walketh by day), and also having an appointment with the princess for a second sitting, he had declined, and Morland, when he heard of it, had clapped him on the back and expressed his fervent gratitude.

Jimmie had been narrating his morning's adventures at Chiltern Towers, and explaining the point of view from which he was painting the portrait. It was to be that of the very great lady, with the blood of the earth's great rulers in her veins. It was to be half full-length, just showing the transparent, aristocratic hands set off by rich old lace at the wrists. A certain acidity of temper betrayed by the pinched nostrils and thin lips he would try to modify, as it would be out of keeping with his basic conception. Norma listened, interested more in the speaker than in the subject, her mind occasionally wandering, as it had been wont to do of late, to a comparison of ideals. Since that half-hour's loneliness on the platform of the little Highland station, she had passed through many hours of unrest. To-day the mood had

again come upon her. A talk with her mother about the great garden-party they were giving in two days' time, to which the princess and the duchess were coming, had aroused her scorn; a casual phrase of Morland's in reference to the election had jarred upon her; a sudden meeting in Cosford with Theodore Weever, and a laughing reference to the decorative wife had brought back the little shiver of fear. The only human being in the world who could settle her mood — and now she felt it consciously — was this odd, sweet-natured man who seemed to live in a beautiful world.

As he talked she listened, and her mind wandered from the subject. She thought of his life, his surroundings, of the girl whose love affair he had told her of so tenderly. She took advantage of a pause, occasioned by the handing of a second cup of tea and the judicious choosing of cake, to start the new topic.

"I suppose Aline is very happy."

Jimmie laughed. "What put my little girl into your head?"

"I have been thinking a good deal about her since you wrote of her engagement. Is it really such an idyll?"

"The love of two sweet, clean young people is always idyllic. It is so untainted — pure as a mountain spring. There is nothing quite like it in the world."

"When are they going to set up house together?"

"Soon, I hope."

"You will miss her."

"Of course," said Jimmie, "enormously. But the thoughts of her happiness will keep me pleasant company. I shall get on all right. Meanwhile it is beautiful to see her. She doesn't know that I watch, but I do. It is

sweet to see her eyes brighten and her cheeks flush and to hear her laughter. It is like stepping for an enchanted moment into a fairy-tale."

"I wish I could step into it — just for one enchanted moment," said Norma.

"You?" asked Jimmie.

"I have never been in one in my life. I disbelieved in them till you came like an apostle of fairyland and converted me. Now I want the consolations of my faith."

An earnest note in her voice surprised him. She did not meet his eyes.

"I don't understand you," he said.

"I thought perhaps you would," she answered. "You seem to understand most things."

"You have your own — happiness."

He hesitated on the word. A quick glance assured her of his ingenuousness. She longed to undeceive him, to shriek out her heartlessness, her contempt for herself and for her life. But pride and loyalty to Morland restrained her within bounds of sanity. She assented to his proposition with a gesture of the shapely hand that lay on the tea-table absently tracing the pattern of the cloth.

"Yes, I have that. But it is n't the fairyland of those two children. You yourself say there is nothing like it in the world. You don't know how I pine for it sometimes — for the things that are sweet and clean and untainted and pure as a mountain spring. They don't come my way. They never will."

"You are wrong," said Jimmie. "Love will bring them all to you — that and a perfect wedded life and little children."

For a flash she raised her eyes and looked full into his, and for the first time the love in the man's heart surged tumultuously. It rose of a sudden, without warning, flooding his being, choking him. What it was of yearning, despair, passion, horror that he saw in her eyes he knew not. He did not read in them the craving of a starved soul for food. To him their burning light was a mystery. All that ever reached his consciousness was that it was a look such as he had never before beheld in a woman's face; and against his will and against his reason it acted like some dark talisman and unlocked floodgates. He clenched the arms of the wickerwork chair, and bit his lip hard, and stared at the ground.

Norma broke into a hard laugh, and lay back in her chair.

"You must be thinking me a great fool," she said, in her usual mocking tones. "When a woman tries to swim in sentiment, she flounders, and either drowns or has to be lugged ignominiously to shore. She can't swim like a man. Thanks for the rescue, Mr. Padgate."

He looked at her for a moment.

"What do you mean?" he said curtly.

"I'm back on dry land. Oh! it is safer for me. There I am protected by my little bodyguard of three—the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. I can't get on without them."

Jimmie leaped from his chair and brought his clenched hands down to his sides in a passionate gesture.

"Stop talking like that, I say!" he cried imperiously.

Then meeting her scared and indignant glance, he bowed somewhat wide of her.

"I beg your pardon," he said, in a tone of no great

apology, and marched out of the little temple and along the gravelled walk of the terrace. Flight, or the loss of self-control, was his only alternative. What she thought of him he did not care. The sense of increasing distance from her alone brought security to his soul.

At the further end he met Mrs. Deering just back from her drive.

"Why, what is the matter, Jimmie?" she asked, twirling an idle sunshade over her pretty head, for the terrace was in deep afternoon shadow.

"Nothing," he replied, with a ghastly attempt at a smile. "I am going for a walk before dinner."

He left her standing, reached the highroad and pounded along it. What a fool he had been! What a mad fool he had been!

Mrs. Deering, with a puzzled expression on her face, watched him disappear. She turned and strolled down to Norma, who greeted her with a satiric smile.

"What have you been doing to Jimmie?" asked Mrs. Deering.

"I have been giving him lessons in worldly wisdom."

"Poor dear! They seem to have disagreed with him."

Norma shrugged her shoulders. "That's his affair, not mine."

"You don't mean to say that you and Jimmie have quarrelled?" laughed Connie. "How delightful! I've always wanted to quarrel with Jimmie just for the pleasure of kissing and making friends. But it has been impossible. Is it serious?"

"I hope not," Norma answered; and then after a pause, "Oh, Connie, I'm afraid I've been a positive brute."

Which evidence of a salutary conviction of her own wrongdoing shows that Jimmie's amazing shout of command had not aroused within her any furious indignation. Indeed, after the first moment of breathless astonishment, she had expressed an odd, almost amusing thrill of admiration for the man who had dared address her in that fashion. It was only a small feminine satisfaction in the knowledge that by going away he would punish himself for his temerity that had restrained her from summoning him back. As soon as he was out of call, she reproached herself for misconduct. She could have strangled the wanton devil that had prompted her cynical speech. And yet the same devil had saved an embarrassing situation. Wedded life and little children! If she had spoken what was trembling on her lips, how could she have looked the man in the face again? Her sex was revolting against that very prospect, was clamouring wildly for she knew not what. She dared not betray herself.

She greeted him smilingly in the drawing-room before dinner, as if nothing had occurred, and chatted pleasantly with Morland over his day's fortunes. Jimmie observed her with a sigh of relief. He had passed the last two hours greatly agitated; he had trembled lest he had revealed to her his soul's secret, and also lest his unmannerliness had given unpardonable offence. In any case, now he saw himself forgiven, and breathed freely. But he remained unusually silent during dinner, and spent most of the evening in the billiard-room with Mr. Hardacre.

That gentleman, joining the ladies later, fell into conversation with his daughter.

"How long is Padgate going to stay?" he asked, mopping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Till the princess has completed her sittings, I suppose," said Norma.

"I wish she'd be quick. I don't know what to do with the fellow. Does n't shoot, can't play billiards worth a cent, and does n't seem to know anybody. It 's like talking to a chap that does n't understand your language. I 've just been at it. Happened to say I 'd like to go to Rome again. He fetches a sigh and says so should he. 'Some of the best wild-duck shooting in the world,' I said. He stared at me for a moment as if I were an escaped lunatic. Now, what on earth should a reasonable being go to that beastly place for except to shoot wild-duck on the marshes?"

Norma laughed the little mocking laugh that always irritated her father.

"You need n't be afraid of not entertaining Mr. Padgate. He must have enjoyed the conversation hugely."

"Damme — if the fellow is laughing at me —" he began.

"He would not be the very fine gentleman that he is," said Norma. "Where is he now?"

"Morland relieved guard in the billiard-room, when the post came in," growled Mr. Hardacre, who shrank from crossing swords with his daughter, and indeed with anybody. "He is happy enough with Morland."

At that particular moment, however, there was not overmuch happiness in the billiard-room. A letter from Aline had been accompanied by one for "David Rendell, Esquire" which she had enclosed. Morland read it, and crushed it angrily into the pocket of his dinner-jacket, and began to knock the balls about in an aimless way. Jimmie watched him anxiously and, as he did not speak, unfolded

his own letter from Aline. Suddenly he rose from the divan where he had been sitting and approached the table.

"There is something here that you ought to know, Morland. A man has been enquiring for you at my house."

"Well, why should n't he?" asked Morland, making a savage shot.

"He enquired for David Rendell."

Morland threw down his cue.

"Well?"

"I am afraid Aline, who is a miracle of sagacity as a general rule, has made a mess of it. You must n't be angry with my poor little girl. Her head is full of sweeter things."

"What has she done?" Morland asked impatiently.

"I 'll read: 'I told him that Mr. Rendell was a friend of yours, and gave him your present address. He muttered something about a false name and went away without thanking me.'"

"Good God!" cried Morland, "what damned fools women are! Did she say what kind of a man he was?"

Jimmie looked through the letter, and finding the passage, read: "'An odd-looking creature, like a mad Methodist parson!'"

Morland uttered an exclamation of anger and apprehension. His brow grew black, and his florid comely features coarsened into ugliness.

"I thought so. It could n't have been any one else. He was the only person who knew. She has given me away nicely. The devil only knows what will happen."

Jimmie leant up against the table and folded his arms, and looked at Morland moving restlessly to and fro and giving vent to his anger.

"Who is this man you seem to be so afraid of?" he asked quietly.

Morland stopped upon the unpleasant word, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, I suppose I am afraid of him. One can't reckon upon anything that he might or might not do. He's like a mad cat. I've seen him. So have you."

"I?"

"Yes — that socialist maniac you dragged me to hear one Sunday in Hyde Park."

"Whew!" said Jimmie. He remembered the look in the orator's eyes, his crazy, meaningless words, his fierce refusal to enter into friendly talk; also Morland's impatient exclamation and abrupt departure as soon as they had learned the man's name.

"He's as mad as a hatter," he said. "If he should take it into his head to come down here and make a row, there will be the deuce to pay," said Morland.

Jimmie reflected for a moment. The man, with his wild talk of maidens lashed to the chariot-wheels of the rich, must have been tortured by the sense of some personal wrong.

"How does he come into the story?" he asked. "You had better tell me."

"The usual way. Oh, I wish to God I had never got into this mess! A man of position is an infernal fool to go rotting about after that sort of thing. Oh, don't you see? He had a crazy passion for her, was engaged to her — he was mad then. When I came along, he had to

drop it, and he has been persecuting her ever since — divided between the desire to marry her in spite of everything, and to murder me. That 's why I had the assumed name and false address. I would n't have let you in for this bother, but I could n't go and run the risk of being blackmailed at a confounded little stationer's shop up a back street. He has been trying to get on my track all the time — and now he 's succeeded, thanks to Aline. Why the devil could n't she hold her tongue ? "

" Because she is an innocent child, who has never dreamed of evil," said Jimmie.

Morland walked about the room, agitated, for a few moments, then halted.

" Oh, yes, I know, Jimmie. She is n't to blame. Besides, the mischief is done, so it 's no use talking."

" Were you thinking of any such possibility in the summer when you asked me to help you ? " said Jimmie.

Morland cast a quick, hopeful glance at his friend.

" Something of the sort. One never knows. You were the only man I could rely on."

" Does this man know you by sight ? "

" Not to my knowledge."

" Then what are you so afraid of ? Look here, my dear old boy," he said cheerily, " you are being frighted by false fire. If it is only a question of dealing with the man when he comes here — that is, supposing he does come — which is very unlikely, I will tackle him as the only person who knows anything about David Rendell. I 'll tell him David Rendell is in Scotland or Honolulu."

" He is on the track of the false name," said Morland, uneasily. " Aline mentions that."

" He is bound to come to me first," said Jimmie. " I 'll

fix him. We'll get on capitally together. There's a freemasonry between lunatics. Leave it all to me."

"Really?" cried Morland, in great eagerness.

"Of course," said Jimmie. "Let us go upstairs."

They passed out of the billiard-room in silence. On their way to the drawing-room Morland murmured in a shamefaced way his apologia. He was just at the beginning of his electoral campaign. It was his own county. He was hand in glove with the duchess, sovereign lady of these parts, and she never forgave a scandal. "Besides," he added, "to quote your own words, it would break Norma's heart." Also, employing the limited vocabulary of his class and type, he reiterated the old assurance that he had not been a beast. He had done all that a man could to make amends. If Jimmie had not loved him so loyally, he would have seen something very pitiful in these excuses; but convinced that Morland had atoned as far as lay in his power for his fault, he trembled for the happiness of only those dear to him.

Norma met them on the drawing-room landing.

"I was coming down to see what had become of you," she said.

"I have been the culprit. I restore him to you," laughed Jimmie. He entered the room and closed the door. The betrothed pair stood for a moment in an embarrassed silence. She laid a hesitating hand on his sleeve.

"Morland —" she said diffidently. "I was really wanting to have a little talk with you. Somehow we don't often see one another."

Morland, surprised at the softness in her voice, led her back to the billiard-room.

Chapter XII

NORMA'S ENLIGHTENMENT

THE development of the germ of goodness in woman may be measured by her tendency towards self-sacrifice. Even the most selfish of her sex, provided she has some rudimentary virtues, hugs close to her bosom some pet little thorn which she loves to dig into her shrinking flesh. She enjoys some odd little mortification, some fantastic humiliation, that is known only to the inner chamber of her soul. Your great-hearted woman practises Suttee daily, greatly to the consternation of an observant yet unperceptive husband. Doubtless this characteristic has a sexual basis, psychological perhaps rather than directly physiological, being an instinctive assertion of the fundamental principle of passivity, which in its turn is translated into the need to be held down and subdued. Thus, if the man does not beat her, she will beat herself; if he is a fool, she will often apply caustic to her wisdom, so that she may reverence him; if he is a knave, she will choke her honesty. Side by side with the assertion of this principle, and indeed often inextricably confused with it, is the maternal impulse, which by manifold divergences from its primary manifestation causes women to find a joy, uncomprehended by men, in pangs of suffering. The higher the type the stronger the impulse towards this sweet self-martyrdom.

Some such theory alone explains the softer tones in Norma's voice when she spoke to Morland. She had passed through two periods of sharp development — the half-hour in Scotland and the hours she had spent since her talk with Jimmie that afternoon. She acted blindly, obeying an imperative voice.

They sat down together on the raised divan. She was dressed in black, with a bunch of yellow roses at her bosom, and her neck and arms gleamed white in the shadow cast by the green shades over the billiard-table. Her face had softened. She was infinitely desirable.

"I have been thinking over our relations, Morland," she said. "Perhaps I have been wrong."

"What do you mean?" he asked in some alarm.

"I told you when you asked me to marry you that it would be wise to put sentiment aside. You agreed, against your will, and have observed the convention very loyally. But I have not treated you well. In putting sentiment aside I was, perhaps, wrong. That is what I wanted to say to you."

"Let me see that I understand you, Norma," said Morland. "You wish that we should be more like — like ordinary lovers?"

"We might try," she whispered.

She waited. Heaven knows what she waited for; but it did not come. The Imp of Mischance again scored his point. The man's mind was filled with the thoughts of another woman in her agony and of a crazy avenger coming with murder in his heart. He took her hand mechanically and raised it to his lips. Her yielding to the caress told him that he could throw his arms around her and treat her loverwise; her words told him that he ought to do so.

Yet he did not. For the moment he was passionless; and to men of his type is not given the power, possessed by men of imaginative temperament, of simulating passion. He forced a laugh.

"How do you think we might begin?"

She went on bravely with her self-imposed task of submission.

"I have heard that the man generally takes the initiative."

He kissed her on the cheek. To do less would have been outrageous.

"I am glad you realise that I am in love with you, at last," he said.

"Are you sure that you are in love with me?" she asked, the chill that had fallen upon her after the lack of response to her first whisper growing colder and colder.

"Of course I am."

"That is all I wanted to hear. Good-night," she said in an odd voice. She rose and put out her hand. Morland opened the door for her to pass and closed it behind her.

Norma went straight to her room, feeling as though she had been tied by the heels to a cart-tail and dragged through the mud. Half undressed, she dismissed her maid summarily. Every place on her body that the girl's fingers touched seemed to be a bruise. She went to bed stupefied with herself.

Meanwhile Morland rang for whisky and soda, and cursed all that appertained to him, knowing that he had missed an amazing opportunity. After the way of feeble men, he thought of a hundred things he might have said and done that would have brought her to his feet. Had he not been watching patiently, ever since his engagement, for her to put off her grand airs, and become a woman like

the rest of them? He should have said the many things he had often said to others. Or, if words were difficult, why in the world had he not kissed her properly after the manner accepted by women as the infallible argument? He conjured up the exceeding pleasantness of such an act. He could feel the melting of her lips, the yielding of her bosom; gradually he worked himself into a red-hot desire. A sudden resolve took him upstairs. There he learned that Norma had retired for the night, and returning to his whisky in the billiard-room, he cursed himself more loudly than before. A hand thrust into the pocket of his dinner-jacket met the poor girl's crumpled letter. Mechanically he took it to the empty grate, and then cursed the fire for not being lit. When Mr. Hardacre came down for a final game of billiards, he found his future son-in-law in an irritable temper, and won an easy game. Rallied upon his lack of form, Morland explained that the damned election was getting on his nerves.

"Did n't get on them when you were shooting to-day," said Mr. Hardacre.

"I made believe that the birds were the beastly voters," replied Morland.

Norma had not yet come down the next morning when he started for Cosford on electioneering business. Nor did he meet her, as he hoped, in the town, carrying on the work of canvassing which she had begun with great success. A dry barrister having been sent down to contest the division in the Liberal interest, was not making much headway in a constituency devoted to the duchess and other members of the tyrannical classes, and thus the task of Norma and her fellow-canvassers was an easy one. To-day, however, she did not appear. Morland consoled him-

self with the assurance that he would put things right in the evening. After all, it was easy enough to kiss a woman who had once shown a desire to be made love to. Every man has his own philosophy of woman. This was Morland's.

Jimmie also started upon his morning's pursuits without seeing Norma. He was somewhat relieved; for he had spent a restless night, dozing off only to dream grotesque dreams of the mad orator and waking to fight with beasts that gnawed his vitals. He came down unstrung, a haggard mockery of himself, and he was glad not to meet her clear eyes. The three-mile walk to Chiltern Towers refreshed him, his work on the portrait absorbed his faculties, and his neighbours at the ducal luncheon-table, to which the duchess in person had invited him, clear-witted women in the inner world of politics and diplomacy, kept his attention at straining point. It was only when he walked back to Heddon Court, although he made a manful attempt to whistle cheerily, that he felt heavy upon his heart the burden of the night. It was a languorous September afternoon, and the tired hush of dying summer had fallen upon the world. The smell of harvest, the sense of golden fulfilment of life hung on the air. Jimmie swung his stick impatiently, and filled his lungs with a draught of the mellow warmth.

"The old earth is good. By God, it 's good!" he cried aloud.

Brave words of a resolute optimism; but they did not lighten his burden.

He reached the house. Beneath an umbrella-tent on the front lawn sat Norma, her hands listlessly holding a closed book on her lap. Jimmie would have lifted his

hat and passed her by, but with a brightening face she summoned him. They talked awhile of commonplace things. Then, after a pause, she asked him, half mockingly, to account for his behaviour the day before. Why had he rated her in that masterful way?

"I can't bear you to speak evilly of yourself," he said.

"Why, since I deserve it?"

"The *you* that you sometimes take a pleasure in assuming to be may deserve it. The real you does n't. And it is the real you that I know — that has given me friendship and is going to marry my dearest friend. The other you is a phantom of a hollow world in which circumstances have placed you."

"I think the phantom is happier than the reality," said Norma, with a laugh. "'The dream is better than the drink.' The hollow world is the safer place, after all."

"Where imagination doth not corrupt and enthusiasms do not break in and steal," said Jimmie, with unusual bitterness. "I have seen very little of it — but you have told me things," he continued lamely, "and your being in it and of it seems a profanation. When you wilfully identify yourself with its ideals, you hurt me; and when I am hurt, I cry out."

"But why should you care so much about what I am and what I am not?" she asked in a tone half of genuine enquiry and half of expectancy, wholly kind and soft.

He dug the point of his stick into the turf and did not raise his eyes. He knew now what a fool's game of peril he was playing, and kept himself in check. Yet his voice trembled as he replied:

"Morland is very dear to me. You, his future wife, have grown dear to me also. I suppose I have lived rather a simple sort of life and take my emotions seriously."

"I hope you thank God for it," said Norma.

The swift rattle of a carriage turning into the drive broke the talk, which had grown too personal to be left voluntarily. Jimmie felt infinitely grateful to the visitors, like a man suddenly saved from a threatening precipice. Leaving Norma with a bow, he fled into the house and selecting a book from the library, went onto the terrace. He needed solitude. Something of which he was unaware was happening. Circumstances were not the same as when he had first arrived. Then he had looked on Norma with brave serenity. He was happy, loving her and receiving frank friendship from her condescending hands. Now it was growing to be a pain to watch her face, a dread to hear her voice. Sweet intercourse had become a danger. And a few days had brought about the change. Why? Of the riot in the woman's nature he knew nothing. In his blank ignorance, seeking the cause within himself, he asked, Why?

He crossed the tennis lawn, went through the little opening at the end of the hedge, and down to the seclusion of the croquet ground. Half-way along the sloping bank beneath the upper terrace some one had left a rug. He threw himself upon it, and tried like many another poor fool to reason down his hunger. But all the sensitive nerves with which the imaginative man, for his curse or his blessing, is endowed, were vibrating from head to foot. Her words sang in his ears: "Why should you care so much about what I am and what I am not?" The real answer burst passionately from his heart.

He had lain there for about half an hour when a gay little laugh aroused him.

"You idyllic creature!"

It was Connie Deering, bewitchingly apparelled, a dainty, smiling pale yellow butterfly, holding as usual an absurd parasol over her head.

"I have been looking for you all over the place," she remarked. "They told me you were somewhere about the grounds. May I sit down?"

He made room for her on the rug, and taking the parasol from her hand, closed it. She settled herself gracefully by his side.

"I repeat I have been looking for you," she said.

"The overpowering sense of honour done me has deprived me of speech," replied Jimmie, with an attempted return to his light-hearted manner.

"Norma is entertaining those dreadful Spencer-Temples," said Mrs. Deering, irrelevantly.

"I must have had a premonition of their terrors, for I fled from before their path," he said. "After all, poor people, what have they done to be called names?" he added.

"They are ugly."

"So am I, yet people don't run away from me."

"I saw you run away from them," she said with a significant nod. "I was at my bedroom window. They spoiled a most interesting little conversation."

Jimmie was startled. He looked at her keenly, but only met laughing eyes.

"They interrupted me certainly. But I could n't have inflicted my society on Miss Hardacre all the afternoon."

"You would have liked to, would n't you? Jimmie dear," she said with a change of tone, "I want to have a talk with you. I 'm the oldest woman friend you have —"

"And by far the sweetest and kindest and prettiest and fascinatingest."

She tapped his hand with her fingers. "Ssh! I 'm serious, awfully serious. I 've never been so serious in my life before. I 've got a duty. I don't often have it, but when I do, it 's a terrible matter."

"You had better go and have it extracted at once, Connie," he laughed, determined to keep the talk in a frivolous channel. But the little lady was determined also.

"Jimmie dear," she said, holding up her forefinger, "I am afraid you are running into danger. I want to warn you. An old friend can do that, can't she?"

"You can say anything you like to me, Connie. But I don't know what you mean."

He suspected her meaning, however, only too shrewdly, and his heart beat with apprehension. Had he been fool enough to betray his secret?

"Are n't you getting just a little too fond of Norma, Jimmie?"

"I could n't get too fond of her," he said, "seeing that she is to be Morland's wife."

"That 's just why you must n't. Come, Jimmie, have n't you fallen a bit in love with her?"

"No," he said with some heat. "Certainly not. How dare I?"

Kindness and teasing were in her eyes.

"My poor dear husband used to say I had the brain of a bird, but I may have the sharp eyes of a bird as well. Come — not just one little bit in love?"

She had sought him with the best intentions in the world. She had long suspected; yesterday and to-day had given her certainty. She would put him on his guard, talk to him like an elder sister, pour forth upon him her vast

wisdom in affairs of the heart, and finally persuade him from his folly to more sensible courses.

"He sha'n't come to grief over Norma if I can prevent it," she had said to herself.

And now, in spite of her altruistic resolve, she could not resist the pleasure of teasing him. She had done so all her life. Her method became less elder-sisterly than she had intended. But she was miles from realising that she touched bare nerves, and that the man was less a man than a living pain.

"I tell you I 'm not in love with her, Connie," he said. "How could I dream of loving her? It would be damnable folly."

"Oh, Jimmie, Jimmie," she said, enjoying his confusion, "what a miserably poor liar you make — and what a precious time you would have in the witness-box if you were a co-respondent! You can't deceive for nuts. You had better confess and have done with it." Then seeing something of the anguish on his face, she bethought her of the serious aspect of her mission. "I could not bear you to break your heart over Norma, dear," she said quite softly.

"Don't madden me, Connie — you don't know what you are saying," he muttered below his breath.

Connie Deering had never heard a man speak in agony of spirit. Her lot had fallen among pleasant places, where life was a smooth, shaven lawn and emotions not more violent than the ripples on a piece of ornamental water. His tone gave her a sudden fright.

"You do love her, then?" she whispered.

"Yes," said Jimmie, drawing himself up in a tight, awkward heap on the slope. "My God, yes, I do love her. I love her with every fibre of brain and body."

The words were out. More came. He could not restrain them. He gave up the attempt, surrendered himself to the drunkenness of his passion, poured out a torrent of riotous speech. What he said he knew not. Such divine madness comes to a man but few times in a life. The sweet-hearted, frivolous woman, sitting there in the trim little paradise of green, with its velvet turf and trim slopes, and tall mask of trees, all mellow in the shade of the soft September afternoon, listened to him with wondering eyes and pale cheeks. It was no longer Jimmie of the homely face that was talking; he was transfigured. His very voice had changed its quality. . . . Did he love her? The word was inept in its inadequacy. He worshipped her like a Madonna. He adored her like a queen. He loved her as the man of hot blood loves a woman. Soul and heart and body clamoured for her. Compared with hers, every other woman's beauty was a glow-worm unto lightning. Her voice haunted him like music heard in sleep. Her presence left a fragrance behind that clouded his senses like incense. Her beauty twined itself into every tendril of every woman's hair he painted, stole into the depths of every woman's eyes. It was a divine obsession.

"You must fight against it," Connie whispered tonelessly.

"Why should I? Who is harmed? Norma? Who will tell her? Not I. If I choose to fill my life with her splendour, what is that to any one? The desire of the moth for the star! Who heeds the moth?"

He went on reckless of speech until his passion had spent itself. Then he could only repeat in a broken way:

"Love her? Heaven knows I love her. My soul is a footstool for her to rest her feet upon."

Connie Deering laid her hand on his.

"I 'm sorry. Oh, I 'm sorry, Jimmie. God bless you, dear."

He raised the hand to his lips. Neither spoke. He plucked at the grass by his side; at length he looked up.

"You won't give me away, will you?" he said with a smile, using her dialect.

She went on her knees and clasped both his wrists. She said the first thing that came, as something sacred, into her head.

"I could no more speak of this to any one than of some of my dead husband's kisses."

"I know you are a good true woman, Connie," he said.

In the silence that followed, Norma, who had come to summon Connie to tea (the Spencer-Temples having called on their drive past the gates merely to deliver a message), and hearing the voice behind the hedge had been compelled against her will to listen — Norma, deadly white, shaken to the roots of her being, crept across the tennis lawn and fled in swaying darkness to her room.

Chapter XIII

THE OPTIMIST AT LARGE

CONNIE DEERING walked back to the house with a silent and still tremulous Jimmie. She had slid her hand through his arm, and now and then gave it an affectionate pat. Within the limitations of her light, gay nature she was a sympathetic and loyal woman, and she had loved Jimmie for many years with the unquestioning fondness that one has for a beloved and satisfying domestic animal. She had recovered from the fright his frantic demonstration had caused her, and her easy temperament had shaken off the little chill of solemnity that had accompanied her vow of secrecy. But she pitied him with all her kind heart, and in herself felt agreeably sentimental.

They strolled slowly into the hall, and paused for a moment before parting.

"When you come to think of it seriously, you won't consider I have made too impossible a fool of myself?" he asked with an apologetic smile.

"I promise," she said affectionately. Then she laughed. Not only was Jimmie's smile contagious, but Connie Deering could not face the pleasant world for more than an hour without laughter.

"I have always said you were a dear, Jimmie, and you are. I almost wish I could kiss you."

Jimmie looked around. They were quite unperceived.

"I do quite," he said, and kissed her on the cheek.

"Now we are really brother and sister," she said with a flush. "You are not going to be too unhappy, are you?"

"I? Oh no, not I," he replied heartily. He repeated this asseveration to himself while dressing for dinner. Why indeed should he be unhappy? Had he not looked a few hours before at God's earth and found that it was good? Besides, to add to the common stock of the world's unhappiness were a crime. "Yes, a crime," he said aloud, with a vigorous pull at his white tie. Then he perceived that it was hopelessly mangled, and wished for Aline, who usually conducted that part of the ceremony of his toilette.

"It will have to do," he said cheerfully, as he turned away from the glass.

Yet, for all his philosophising, he was surprised at the relief that his wild confession to Connie had afforded him. The burden that had seemed too heavy for him to bear had now grown magically light. He attributed the phenomenon to Connie Deering, to the witchery of her sweet sympathy and the comfort of her sisterly kiss. By the time he had finished dressing the acute pain of the past two days had vanished, and as he went down the stairs he accounted himself a happy man. In the drawing-room he met Norma, and chatted to her almost light-heartedly. He did not notice the constraint in her manner, her avoidance of his glance, the little pucker of troubled brows; nor was he aware of her sigh of relief when the door opened and the servant announced Mr. Theodore Weever, who with one or two other people were dining at the house. Mr. and Mrs. Hardacre followed on the American's heels,

and soon the rest of the party had assembled. Jimmie had no opportunity for further talk with Norma, who studiously kept apart from him all the evening, and during dinner devoted herself to subacid conversation with Morland and to a reckless interchange of cynical banter with Weever. Jimmie, talking with picturesque fancy about his student days in the Rue Bonaparte to his neighbour, a frank fox-hunting and sport-loving young woman, never dreamed of the chaos of thoughts and feelings that whirled behind the proud face on the opposite side of the table; and Norma, when her mind now and then worked lucidly, wondered at the strength and sweetness of the man who could subdue such passion and laugh with a gaiety so honest and sincere. For herself, Theodore Weever, with his icy humour that crystallised her own irony into almost deadly wit, was her sole salvation during the interminable meal. Once Morland, listening with admiration, whispered in her ear:

"I've never heard you in such good form."

She had to choke down an hysterical impulse of laughter and swallow a mouthful of champagne. Later, when the women guests had gone, she slipped up to her room without saying good-night to Morland, and, dismissing her maid, as she had done the night before, sat for a long time, holding her head in her hands, vainly seeking to rid it of words that seemed to have eaten into her brain. And when she thought of Morland, of last night, of her humiliation, she flushed hot from hair to feet. She was only five-and-twenty, and the world had not as yet completed its work of hardening. It was a treacherous and deceitful world; she had prided herself on being a finished product of petrifaction, and here she lay, scorched and

bewildered, like any soft and foolish girl who had been suddenly brought too near the flame of life. Keenly she felt the piteousness of her defeat. In what it exactly consisted she did not know. She was only conscious of broken pride, the shattering of the little hard-faced gods in her temple, the tearing up of the rails upon which she had reckoned to travel to her journey's end. Hers was a confused soul state, devoid of immediate purpose. A breach of her engagement with Morland did not occur to her mind, and Jimmie was merely an impersonal utterer of volcanic words. She slept but little. In the morning she found habit by her bedside; she clothed herself therein and faced the day.

Much was expected of her. The great garden-party was to take place that afternoon. Her Serene Highness the Princess of Herren-Rothbeck had signified that she would do Mr. and Mrs. Hardacre the honour of being present. Her Grace the Duchess of Wiltshire would accompany the princess. The *ban* and *arrière-ban* of the county had been invited, and the place would be filled with fair women agog to bask in the smiles of royalty, and ill-tempered men dragged away from their partridges by ambitious wives. A firm of London caterers had contracted for the refreshments. A military band would play on the terrace. A clever French showman whom Providence had sent to cheer the dying hours of the London season, and had kept during the dead months at a variety theatre, was coming down with an authentic Guignol. He had promised the choicest pieces in his repertoire — *la vraie grivoiserie française* — and men who had got wind of the proposed entertainment winked at one another wickedly. The garden-party was to be an affair of splendour worthy

of the royal lady who had deigned to shed her serenity upon the county families assembled; and Mr. Hardacre had raised a special sum of money to meet the expenses.

"I shall have to go to the Jews, my dear," he had said to his wife when they were first discussing ways and means.

"Oh, go to the — Jews then," said Mrs. Hardacre, almost betrayed, in her irritation, into an unwifely retort. "What does it matter, what does any sacrifice matter, when once we have royalty at the house? You are such a fool, Benjamin."

He had a singular faculty for arousing the waspishness of his wife; yet, save on rare occasions, he was the meekest of men in her presence.

"Well, you know best, Eliza," he said.

"I have n't been married to you for six-and-twenty years without being perfectly certain of that," she replied tartly.

So Mr. Hardacre went to the Jews, and the princess promised to come to Mrs. Hardacre.

Norma was not the only one that morning who was aroused to a sense of responsibility. The footman entering Jimmie's bedroom brought with him a flat cardboard box neatly addressed in Aline's handwriting. The box contained a new shirt, two new collars, a new silk tie, and a pair of grey suède gloves; also a letter from Aline instructing him as to the use of these various articles of attire.

"Be sure to wear your frock-coat," wrote the director of Jimmie's conduct. "I wish you had one less than six years old; but I went over it with benzine and ammonia before I packed it up, so perhaps it won't be so bad. And wear your patent-leather evening shoes. They 'll look quite smart if you 'll tie the laces up tight, and stick the ends in between the shoe and the sock. Oh, I wish I could come

and turn you out decently! and *please*, Jimmie dear, don't cut yourself shaving and go about all day with a ridiculous bit of cotton wool on your dear chin. Tony says you need n't wear the frock-coat, but I know better. What acquaintance has he with princesses and duchesses? And that reminds me to tell you that Tony —" *et cætera, et cætera*, in a manner that brought the kindest smile in the world into Jimmie's eyes.

He dressed with scrupulous regard to directions, but not in the frock-coat. He had a morning sitting with the princess at Chiltern Towers to get through before airing himself in the splendour of benzine and ammonia. He put on his old tweed jacket and went downstairs. Morland was the only person as yet in the breakfast-room. He held a morning paper tight in his hand, and stared through the window, his back to the door. On Jimmie's entrance he started round, and Jimmie saw by a harassed face that something had happened.

"My dear fellow —" he began in alarm.

Morland smoothed out the paper with nervous fingers, and threw it somewhat ostentatiously on a chair. Then he walked to the table and poured himself out some tea. The handle of the silver teapot slid in his grasp, and awkwardly trying to save the pouring flood of liquid, he dropped the teapot among the cups and saucers. It was a disaster, but one that could have been adequately greeted by a simpler series of expletives. He cursed vehemently.

"What 's the matter, man?" asked Jimmie.

Morland turned violently upon him.

"The very devil 's the matter. There never was such a mess since the world began. What an infernal fool I have been! You do well to steer clear of women."

"Tell me what 's wrong and I may be able to help you."

Morland looked at him for a moment in gloomy doubt. Then he shook his head.

"You can't help me. I thought you could, but you can't. It 's a matter for a lawyer. I must run up to town."

"And cut the garden-party?"

"That 's where I 'm tied," exclaimed Morland, impatiently. "I ought to start now, but if I cut the garden-party the duchess would never forgive me — and by Jove, I may need the duchess more than ever — and I 've got a meeting to attend in Cosford this morning to which a lot of people are coming from a distance."

"Can't I interview the lawyer for you?"

"No. I must do it myself."

The butler entered and looked with grave displeasure at the wreckage on the tea-tray. While he was repairing the disaster, Morland went back to the window and Jimmie stood by his side.

"If you fight it through squarely, it will all come right in the end."

"You don't mind my not telling you about it?" said Morland, in a low voice.

"Why should I? In everything there is a time for silence and a time for speech."

"You 're right," said Morland, thrusting his hands into his trousers' pockets; "but how I am to get through this accursed day in silence I don't know."

They sat down to breakfast. Morland rejected the offer of tea, and called for a whisky and soda which he nearly drained at a gulp. Mr. Hardacre came in, and eyed the long glass indulgently.

"Bucking yourself up, eh? Why did n't you ask for a pint of champagne?"

He opened the newspaper and ran through the pages. Morland watched him with swift nervous glances, and uttered a little gasp of relief when he threw it aside and attacked his grilled kidneys. His own meal was soon over. Explaining that he had papers to work at in the library, he hurried out of the room.

"Can't understand a man being so keen on these confounded politics," his host remarked to Jimmie across the table. A polite commonplace was all that could be expected in reply. Politics were engrossing.

"That 's the worst of it," said Mr. Hardacre. "In the good old days a man could take his politics like a gentleman; now he has got to go at them like a damned blaspheming agitator on a tub."

"Cosford was once a pretty little pocket borough, was n't it?" said Jimmie. "Now Trade's unfeeling train usurp the privileges of His Grace of Wiltshire and threaten to dispossess his nominee. Instead of one simple shepherd recording his pastoral vote we have an educated electorate daring to exercise their discretion."

Mr. Hardacre looked at Jimmie askance; he always regarded an allusive style with suspicion, as if it necessarily harboured revolutionary theories.

"I hope you're not one of those—" He checked himself as he was going to say "low radical fellows." Politeness forbade. "I hope you are not a radical, Mr. Padgate?"

"I am sure I don't quite know," replied Jimmie, cheerfully.

"Humph!" said Mr. Hardacre, "I believe you are."

Jimmie laughed; but Mr. Hardacre felt that he held

the key to the eccentric talk of his guest. Jimmie Padgate was a radical; a fearful wildfowl of unutterable proclivities, to whom all things dreadful were possible.

"I," he continued, "am proud to be a Tory of the old school."

The entrance of the ladies put a stop to the distressful conversation.

Jimmie, whose life during the past few days had been a curious compound of sunshine and shadow, went about his morning's work with only Morland's troubles weighing upon him. Of their specific nature he had no notion; he knew they had to do with the unhappy love affair; but as Morland was going to put matters into the hands of his lawyers, a satisfactory solution was bound to be discovered. Like all simple-minded men, he had illimitable faith in the powers of solicitors and physicians; it was their business to get people out of difficulties, and if they were capable men they did their business. Deriving much comfort from this fallacy, he thought as little as might be about the matter. In fact he quite enjoyed his morning. He sat before his easel at the end of a high historic gallery, the bright morning light that streamed in through the windows tempered by judiciously arranged white blinds; and down the vista were great paintings, and rare onyx tables, and priceless chairs and statuary, all harmonising with the stately windows and painted ceiling and polished floor. In front of him, posed in befitting attitude, sat the royal lady, with her most urbane expression upon her features, and, that which pleased him most, the picture was just emerging from the blurred mass of paint, an excellent though somewhat idealised portrait. So he worked unfalteringly with the artist's joy in the consciousness of

successful efforts, and his good-humour infected even his harsh sitter, who now and then showed a wintry gleam of gaiety, and uttered a guttural word of approbation.

"You shall come to Herren-Rothbeck and baint the bortrait of the brince my brother," she said graciously. "Would that blease you?"

"I should just think it would," said Jimmie.

The princess laughed — a creaking, rusty laugh, but thoroughly well intentioned. Jimmie glanced at her enquiringly.

"I like you," she responded. "You are so natural — what you English call refreshing. A German would have made a ceremonious speech as long as your mahl-stick."

"I am afraid I must learn ceremony before I come to court, Madam," said Jimmie.

"If you do, you will have forgotten how to baint bortraits," said the princess.

Thus, under the sun of princely favour, was Jimmie proceeding on the highroad to fortune. Never had the future seemed so bright. His bombastic jest about being appointed painter in ordinary to the crowned heads of Europe was actually going to turn out a reality. He lost himself in daydreams of inexhaustible coffers from which he could toss gold in lapfuls to Aline. She should indeed walk in silk attire, and set up housekeeping with Tony in a mansion in Park Lane.

On the front lawn at Heddon Court he met Connie and waved his hat in the air. She went to him, and, peering into his smiling face, laid her hand on his sleeve.

"Whatever has happened? Have you two stepped into each other's shoes?"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"You know — Norma."

"My dear Connie —" he began.

"Well, it seemed natural. Here are you as happy as an emperor; and there is Morland come back from Cosford with the look of a hunted criminal."

Chapter XIV

THE BUBBLE REPUTATION

THE princess had the affability to inform Mrs. Hardacre that it was a "charming barty," and Mrs. Hardacre felt that she had not lived in vain. Henceforth she would be of the innermost circle of the elect of the county. Exclusive front doors would open respectfully to her. She would be consulted on matters appertaining to social polity. She would be a personage. She would also make her neighbour, Lady FitzHubert, sick with envy. A malignant greenness on that lady's face she noted with a thrill of pure happiness, and she smilingly frustrated all her manœuvres to get presented to Her Serene Highness. She presented her rival, instead, to Jimmie.

"My dear Lady FitzHubert, let me introduce Mr. Padgate, who is painting the dear princess's portrait. Mr. Padgate is staying with us."

Whereby Mrs. Hardacre conveyed the impression that Heddon Court and Chiltern Towers contained just one family party, the members of which ran in and out of either house indiscriminately. It may be mentioned that Jimmie did not get on particularly well with Lady FitzHubert. He even confided afterwards to Connie Deering his suspicion that now and again members of the aristocracy were lacking in true urbanity.

By declaring the garden-party to be charming the princess only did justice to the combined efforts of the Hardacres and Providence. The warm golden weather and the chance of meeting august personages had brought guests from far and near. The lawns were bright with colour and resonant with talk. A red-coated band played on the terrace. Between the items of music, Guignol, housed in the Greek temple, with the portico for a proscenium, performed his rogueries to the delight of hastily assembling audiences. Immediately below, a long white-covered table gleamed with silver tea-urns and china, and all the paraphernalia of refreshments. At the other end of the lawn sat the august personages surrounded by the elect.

Among these was Morland. But for him neither blue September skies nor amiable duchesses had any charm. To the man of easy living had come the sudden shock of tragedy, and the music and the teacups and the flatteries seemed parts of a ghastly farce. The paragraph he had read in the paper that morning obsessed him. The hours had seemed one long shudder against which he vainly braced his nerves. He had loved the poor girl in his facile way. The news in itself was enough to bring him face to face with elementals. But there was another terror added. The chance word of a laughing woman had put him on the rack of anxiety. Getting out of the train at Cosford, she had seen the queerest figure of a man step on to the platform, with the face of Peter the Hermit and the costume of Mr. Stiggins. Morland's first impulse had been to retreat precipitately from Cosford, and take the next train to London, whither he ought to have gone that morning. The tradition-bred Englishman's distaste for craven flight kept him irresolutely hanging round the duchess. He thought

of whispering a private word to Jimmie; but Jimmie was far away, being introduced here and there, apparently enjoying considerable popularity. Besides, the whisper would involve the tale of the newspaper paragraph, and Morland shrank from confiding such news to Jimmie. No one on earth must know it save his legal adviser, an impersonal instrument of protection. He did what he had done once during five horrible weeks at Oxford, when an Abingdon barmaid threatened him with a breach of promise action. He did nothing and trusted to luck. Happy chance brought to light the fact that she was already married. Happy chance might save him again.

Beyond the mere commonplaces of civility he had exchanged no words that day with Norma. Moved by an irritating feeling of shame coupled with a certain repugnance of the flesh, he had deliberately avoided her; and his preoccupation had not allowed him to perceive that the avoidance was reciprocated. When they happened to meet in their movements among the guests, they smiled at each other mechanically and went their respective ways. Once, during the afternoon, Mr. Hardacre, red and fussy, took him aside.

"I have just heard a couple of infernal old cats talking of Norma and that fellow Weever. There they are together now. Will you give Norma a hint, or shall I?"

Morland looked up and saw the pair on the terrace, midway between the band and the Guignol audience.

"I'm glad she has got somebody to amuse her," he said, turning away. He was almost grateful to Weever for taking Norma off his hands.

Meanwhile Jimmie was continuing to find life full of agreeable surprises. Lady FitzHubert was not the only

lady to whom he was presented as the Mr. Padgate who was painting the princess's portrait. Mrs. Hardacre waived the personal grudge, and flourished him tactfully in the face of the county; and the county accepted him with unquestioning ingenuousness. He was pointed out as a notability, became the well-known portrait-painter, the celebrated artist, *the* James Padgate, and thus achieved the bubble reputation. A guest who was surreptitiously reporting the garden-party for the local paper took eager notes of the personal appearance of the eminent man, and being a woman of the world, professed familiarity with his works. For the first time in his life he found himself a person of importance. The fact of his easy inclusion in the charmed circle cast a glamour over the crudities of the gala costume designed and furbished up with so much anxious thought by Aline, and people (who are kindly as a rule when their attention is diverted from the trivial) looked only at his face and were attracted to the man himself. Only Lady FitzHubert, who had private reasons for frigidity, treated him in an unbecoming manner. Other fair ladies smiled sweetly upon him, and spread abroad tales of his niceness, and thus helped in the launching of him as a fashionable portrait-painter upon the gay world.

He had a brief interlude of talk with Norma by the refreshment-table.

"I hope you are not being too much bored by all this," she said in her society manner.

"Bored!" he cried. "It's delightful."

"What about the hollow world where imagination doth not corrupt and enthusiasms do not break in and steal?"

"It's a phantom dust-heap for inept epigrams. I don't believe it exists."

"You must n't preach a gospel one day and give it the lie the next," she said, half seriously; "for then I won't know what to believe. You don't seem to realise your responsibilities."

He echoed the last word in some surprise. Norma broke into a little nervous laugh.

"You don't suppose you can go about without affecting your fellow-creatures? It is well that you don't know what a disturbing element you are."

She turned her head away and closed her eyes for a second or two, for the words she had overheard there by the hedge, last evening, rang in her ears. Perhaps it had been well for Jimmie if he had known. Before he had time to reply, she recovered herself, and added quickly:

"I am glad you are enjoying yourself."

"How can I help it when every one is so kind to me?" he said brightly. "I came down here an obscure painter, a veritable *pictor ignotus*, and all your friends are as charming to me as if I were the President of the Royal Academy."

Connie Deering came up with a message for Norma and carried her off to the house.

"How does Jimmie like being lionised?" she asked on the way.

Norma repeated his last speech.

"He has n't any idea of the people's motives." She added somewhat hysterically:

"The man is half fool, half angel —"

"And altogether a *man*. Don't you make any mistake about that," said Connie, with a pretty air of finality. "You don't know as much about him as I do."

"I 'm not so sure about that," said Norma.

"I am," said Connie.

Jimmie was wandering away from the refreshment-table when Theodore Weever stopped him.

"That's a famous portrait of yours, Mr. Padgate. I saw it to-day after lunch. I offer you my congratulations."

Jimmie thanked him, said modestly that he hoped it was a good likeness.

"Too good by a long chalk," laughed the American. "Her Serene Skinflint does n't deserve it. I bet you she beat you down like a market-woman haggling for fish."

Jimmie stuck his hands on his hips and laughed.

"You don't deny it. You should n't have let her. She is rolling in money."

"I am afraid one does n't bother much with the commercial side of things," said Jimmie.

"That's where you make the mistake. Money is money, and it is better in one's own pockets than in anybody else's. But that's not what I wanted to speak to you about. I wonder if you would let me have the pleasure of calling at your studio some day? I'm collecting a few pictures, and I should regard it as a privilege to be allowed to look round yours."

Jimmie, having no visiting cards, scribbled his address on the back of an envelope. He would be delighted to see Mr. Weever any time he was passing through London. Weever bowed, and turned to greet a passing acquaintance, leaving a happy artist. A miracle had happened; the star of his fortunes had arisen. A week ago it was below the horizon, shedding a faint, hopeful glimmer in the sky. Now it shone bright overhead. The days of struggle and disappointment were over. He had come into his kingdom of recognition. All had happened to-day: the princess's promise of another and more illustrious royal portrait; the

sudden leap into fame; the patronage of the American financier. One has to be the poor artist, with his youth — one record of desperate endeavour — behind him, to know what these things mean. The delicate flattery of strange women, however commonplace or contemptible it may be to the successful, was a new, rare thing to Jimmie and appeased an unknown hunger. The prospect of good work done and delivered to the world, without sordid, heart-breaking bargainings, shimmered before him like a paradise. Old habit made him long for Aline. How pleased the child would be when she heard the glad news! He saw the joy on her bright face and heard her clap her hands together, and he smiled. He would return to her a conqueror, having won the prizes she had so often wept for — name and fame and fortune. The band was playing the "Wedding March" from "Lohengrin." By chance, as he was no musician, he recognised it.

"Aline shall have a wedding dress from Paris," he said half aloud, and he smiled again. The world had never been so beautiful.

He embraced all of it that was visible in a happy, sweeping glance. Then with the swiftness of lightning the smile on his face changed into consternation.

For a moment he stood stock still, staring at the sudden figure of a man. It was Stone, the mad orator of Hyde Park. There was no possibility of mistaking him at a distance of fifteen or twenty yards. He wore the same rusty black frock-coat and trousers, the same dirty collar and narrow black tie, the same shapeless clerical hat. His long neck above the collar looked raw and scabious like a vulture's. In his hand he carried a folded newspaper. He had suddenly emerged upon the end of the terrace from the

front entrance, and was descending the steps that led down to the tennis lawn. If he walked straight on, he would come to the group surrounding the princess and the Duchess of Wiltshire. Two or three people were already eyeing him curiously.

Morland's strange dread of the man flashed upon Jimmie. He hurried forward to meet him. Of what he was about to do he had no definite idea. Perhaps he could head Stone off, take him away from the grounds on the pretext of listening to his grievances. At any rate, a scandal must be avoided. As he drew near, he observed Morland, who had been bending down in conversation with the duchess, rise and unexpectedly recognise Stone.

A manservant bearing a small tray with some teacups ran up to the extraordinary intruder, who waved him away impatiently. The servant put down his tray and caught him by the arm.

"You have no business here."

Stone shook himself free.

"I have. Where is Mr. Rendell? Tell him I have to speak with him."

"There is no such person here," said the servant. "Be off!"

Jimmie reached the spot, as a few of the nearer guests were beginning to take a surprised interest in the altercation. Morland came forward from behind the duchess's chair and cast a swift glance at Jimmie.

"If you don't go, I shall make you," said the servant, preparing to execute his threat. The man looked dangerous.

"I must see Mr. David Rendell," he cried, beginning to struggle.

Jimmie drew the servant away.

"I know this gentleman," he said quietly. "Mr. Stone, Mr. Rendell is not here, but if you will come with me, I will listen to you, and tell him anything you have to say."

Mr. Hardacre, who had seen the scuffle from a distance, came up in a fluster.

"What's all this? What's all this? Who is this creature? Please go away." He began to hustle the man.

"Stop! He's an acquaintance of Padgate's," said Morland, huskily.

There was a short pause. Stone stared around at the well-dressed men and women, at the seated figures of the princess and the duchess, at the servant who had picked up the tray, at the band who were still playing the "Wedding March" from "Lohengrin," at the red-faced, little, blustering man, at the beautiful cool setting of green, and the look in his eyes was that of one who saw none of these things. Morland edged to Jimmie's side.

"For God's sake, get him away," he said in a low voice.

Jimmie nodded and touched the man's arm.

"Come," said he.

"Yes, please take him off! What the dickens does he want?" said Mr. Hardacre.

Stone turned his burning eyes upon him.

"I have come to find an infamous seducer," he replied, with a melodramatic intensity that would have been ludicrous had his face not been so ghastly. "His name is Rendell."

There was a shiver of interest in the crowd.

"*Was sagt er?*" the princess whispered to her neighbour.

Jimmie again tried to lead Stone away, but the distraught creature seemed lost in thought and looked at him fixedly.

"I have seen you before," he said at last.

"Of course you have," said Jimmie. "In Hyde Park. Don't you remember?"

Suddenly, with a wrench of his hands he tore an unmounted photograph from the folded newspaper and threw it on the ground. His eyes blazed.

"I thought I should find him. One of you is David Rendell. It is not your real name. That I know. Which of you is it?"

Jimmie had sprung upon the photograph. Instinct rather than the evidence of sight told him that it was an amateur portrait of himself and Morland taken one idle afternoon in the studio by young Tony Merewether. It had hardly lain the fraction of a second on the ground; but to Jimmie it seemed as if the two figures had flashed clear upon the sight of all the bystanders. He glanced quickly at Morland, who stood quite still now with stony face and averted eyes. He too had recognised the photograph, and he cursed himself for a fool for having given it to the girl. He had had it loose in his pocket; she had pleaded for it; she had no likeness of him at all. He was paying now for his imprudent folly. Like Jimmie, he feared lest others should have recognised the photograph. But he trusted again to chance. Jimmie had undertaken the unpleasant business and his wit would possibly save the situation.

Jimmie did not hesitate. A man is as God made him, heart and brain. To his impulsive imagination the photograph would be proof positive for the world that one of the two was the infamous seducer. It did not occur to

him to brazen the man out, to send him about his business; wherein lies the pathos of simple-mindedness. The decisive moment had come. To Morland exposure would mean loss of career, and, as he conceived it, loss of Norma; and to the beloved woman it would mean misery and heart-break. So he committed an heroic folly.

"Well, I *am* Rendell," he said in a loud voice. "What then?"

Heedless of shocked whisperings and confused voices, among which rose a virtuously indignant "Great heavens!" from Mrs. Hardacre, he moved away quickly towards the slope, motioning Stone to follow. But Stone remained where he stood, and pointed at Jimmie with lean, outstretched finger, and lifted up his voice in crazy rhetoric, which was heard above the "Wedding March." No one tried to stop him. It was too odd, too interesting, too dramatic.

"The world shall know the tale of your lust, and the sun shall not go down upon your iniquity. Under false promises you betrayed the sweetest flower in God's garden. Basely you taunted her in her hour of need. Murder and suicide are on your head. There is the record for all who wish to read it. Read it," he cried, flinging the newspaper at Mrs. Hardacre's feet. "Read how she killed her new-born babe, the child of this devil, and then hanged herself."

Jimmie came two or three steps forward.

"Stop this mad foolery," he cried.

Stone glared at him for a fraction of a second, thrust his hand into the breast-pocket of his frock-coat, drew out a revolver, and shot him.

Jimmie staggered as a streak of fire passed through him, and swung round. The women shrieked and rushed to-

gether behind the princess and the duchess, who remained calmly seated. The men with one impulse sprang forward to seize the madman; but as he leaped aside and threatened his assailants with his revolver, they hung back. The band stopped short in the middle of a bar.

Norma and Connie Deering and one or two others who had been in the house, unaware of the commotion of the last few minutes, ran out on the terrace as they heard the shot and the sudden cessation of the band. They saw the crowd of frightened, nervous people below, and the grotesque figure in his rusty black pointing the pistol. And they saw Jimmie march up to him, and in a dead silence they heard him say:

"Give me that revolver. What is a silly fool like you doing with fire-arms? You could n't hit a haystack at a yard's distance. Give it to me, I say."

The man's arm was outstretched, and the pistol was aimed point-blank at Jimmie. Connie Deering gripped Norma's arm, and Norma, feeling faint, grew white to the lips.

"Give it to me," said Jimmie again.

The man wavered, his arm drooped slightly; with the action of one who takes a dangerous thing from a child, Jimmie quietly wrenched the revolver from his grasp.

Norma gave a gasp of relief and began to laugh foolishly. Connie clapped her hands in excitement.

"Did n't I tell you he was a man? By heavens, the only one in the lot!"

Jimmie pointed towards the terrace steps.

"Go!" he said.

But there was a rush now to seize the disarmed Stone, the red coats of the bandsmen mingling with the black of

the guests. Jimmie, with a curious flame through his shoulder and a swimming in his head, swerved aside. Morland ran up, with a white face.

"My God! He has hit you. I thought he had missed."

"No," said Jimmie, smiling at the reeling scene. "I 'm all right. Keep the photograph. It was silly to give one's photograph away. I always was a fool."

Morland pocketed the unmounted print. He tried to utter a word of thanks, but the eyes of the scared and scandalised crowd a few steps away were upon them, and many were listening. For a moment during the madman's crazy indictment of Jimmie — for the horrible facts were only too true — he had had the generous impulse to come forward and at all costs save his friend; but he had hesitated. The shot had been fired. The dramatic little scene had followed. To proclaim Jimmie's innocence and his own guilt now would be an anticlimax. It was too late. He would take another opportunity of exonerating Jimmie. So he stood helpless before him, and Jimmie, feeling fainter and fainter, protested that he was not hurt.

They stood a bit apart from the rest. By this time men and women had flocked from all quarters, and practically the whole party had assembled on the tennis lawn. Norma still stood with Connie on the terrace, her hand on her heart. A small group clustered round a man who had picked up the newspaper and was reading aloud the ghastly paragraph marked by Stone in blue pencil. The Hardacres were wringing their hands before a stony-faced princess and an indignant duchess, who announced their intention of immediate departure. Every one told every

one else the facts he or she had managed to gather. Human nature and the morbidly stimulated imagination of naturally unimaginative people invented atrocious details. Jimmie's new-born fame as a painter was quickly merged into hideous notoriety. His star must have been Lucifer, so swift was its fall.

Mr. Hardacre left his wife's side, and dragged Morland a step or two away, and whispered excitedly:

"What a scandal! What a hell of a scandal! Before royalty, too. It will be the death of us. The damned fellow must go. You must clear him out of the house!"

"He 's hit. Look at him," exclaimed Morland.

Jimmie heard his host's whisper in a dream. It seemed a hoarse voice very, very far off. He laughed in an idiotic way, waved his hand to the gyrating crowd, and stumbled a few yards towards the slope. The world swam into darkness and he fell heavily on his face.

Then, to the amazement of the county, Norma with a ringing cry rushed down the slope, and threw herself beside Jimmie's body and put his head on her lap. And there she stayed until they dragged her away, uttering the queer whimpering exclamations of a woman suddenly stricken with great terror. She thought Jimmie was dead.

Chapter XV

MRS. HARDACRE LAUGHS

THEY took Jimmie into the house, and Norma, looking neither to right nor left, walked by the side of those carrying him, the front of her embroidered dress smeared with blood. Every time her hands came in contact with the delicate fabric, they left a fresh smear. Of this she was unconscious. She was unconscious too, save in a dull way, of the staring crowd; but she held her head high, and when Morland spoke to her by the drawing-room window through which they passed, she listened to what he had to say, bowed slightly, and went on.

"It is only a flesh wound. If it had been the lung, he would have spat blood. I don't think it is serious."

He spoke in a curiously apologetic tone, as if anxious to exculpate himself from complicity in the attempted murder. He was horribly frightened. Two deaths laid in one day at a man's door are enough. The possibility of a third was intolerable. The sense of the unheroic part he had just played was beginning to creep over him like a chilling mist. The consequences of confession, the only means whereby Jimmie could be rehabilitated, loomed in front of him more and more disastrous. It would be presenting himself to the world as a coward as well as a knave. That prospect, too, frightened him. Lastly, there was Norma, white, terror-stricken, metamorphosed in a second into a creature of

primitive emotions. Like the other shocks of that unhallowed day, her revelation of unsuspected passions brought him face to face with the unfamiliar; and to the average sensual man the unfamiliar brings with it an atmosphere of the uncanny, the influence to be feared. His attitude, therefore, when he addressed her was ludicrously humble.

She bowed and passed on. By this time she knew that Jimmie was not dead. Morland's words even reassured her. Her breath came hard through her delicate nostrils, and her bosom heaved up and down beneath the open-work bodice with painful quickness. Only a few were allowed to stay in the dining-room, Morland, Mr. Hardacre, Theodore Weever on behalf of the duchess, and one or two others, while the Cosford doctor, who had been invited to the garden-party, made his examination. Norma went through into the hall. At the bottom of the stairs she met Connie in piteous distress.

"Oh, my poor dear, my poor dear, we did n't know! I have just heard all about it. It is terrible!"

Norma put up her hand beseechingly.

"Don't, Connie dear; don't talk of it. I can't bear it. I must be alone. Send me up word what the doctor says."

She went to her room, sat there and waited. Presently her maid entered with the message from Mrs. Deering. The doctor's report was favourable — the wound not in any way dangerous, the bullet easily extractable. They had carried the patient to his bedroom, and Mrs. Deering had wired for Miss Marden to come down by the first train. Norma dismissed the maid, and tried, in a miserable wonder, to realise all that had happened.

A woman accustomed to many emotions can almost always hold herself in check, if she be of strong will. Ex-

perience has taught her the meaning and the danger of those swift rushes of the blood that lead to unreasoning outburst. She is forewarned, forearmed, and can resist or not as occasion demands. But even she is sometimes taken unawares. How much the more likely to give way is the woman who has never felt passionate emotion in her life before. The premonitory symptoms fail to convey the sense of danger to her inexperienced mind. Before the will has time to act she is swept on by a new force, bewildering, irresistible. It becomes an ecstatic madness of joy or grief, and to the otherwise rational being her actions are of no account. This curse of quick responsiveness afflicts men to a less degree. If the first chapters of Genesis could be brought up to date, woman would be endowed, not with an extra rib, but with an extra nerve.

Now that she knew the shooting of Jimmie to be an affair of no great seriousness, her heart sickened at the thought of her wild exhibition of feeling. She heard the sniggering and ridicule in every carriage-load of homeward-bound guests. From the wife of the scrubby curate to the Princess of Herren-Rothbeck, her name was rolled like a delicate morsel on the tongue of every woman in the county. And the inference they could not fail to draw from her action was true — miserably true. But she had only become poignantly aware of things at the moment when she saw the lean haggard man in rusty black covering Jimmie with the revolver. Then all the unrest of soul which she had striven to allay with her mockery, all the disquieting visions of sweet places to which she had scornfully blinded her eyes, all the burning words of passion whose clear echoing had wrapped her body in hateful fever the night before, converged like electric currents into one

steady light radiant with significance. Two minutes afterwards, when Jimmie fell, civilisation slipped from her like a loose garment, and primitive woman threw herself by his side. But now, reclothed, she shivered at the memory.

The door opened suddenly, and Mrs. Hardacre entered. There was battle in every line of the hard face and in every movement of the thin, stiff figure. Norma rose from the window where she had been sitting and faced her mother defiantly.

"I know what you are going to say to me. Don't you think you might wait a little? It will keep."

"It won't. Sit down," said Mrs. Hardacre between her teeth.

"I prefer to stand for the moment," said Norma.

Mrs. Hardacre lost her self-control.

"Are we to send you to a madhouse? What do you mean by your blazing folly? Before the whole county — before the duchess — before the princess! Do you know what I have had to go through the last half-hour? Do you know that we may never set foot in Chiltern Towers again? Do you know we are the scandal and the laughing-stock of the county? As if one thing was n't sufficient — for you to crown it by behaving like a hysterical school-girl! Do you know what interpretation every scandal-mongering tabby in the place is putting on your insane conduct?"

"Oh, yes," said Norma, looking at her mother stonily; "and for once in their spiteful lives they are quite right."

"What do you mean?" gasped Mrs. Hardacre.

"I think my meaning is obvious."

"That man — that painter man dressed like a second-hand clothes-dealer — that — that beast?"

Mrs. Hardacre could scarcely trust her senses. The

true solution of her daughter's extraordinary behaviour had never crossed her most desperate imaginings. But then she had not had much time for quiet speculation. The speeding of her hurriedly departing guests had usurped all the wits of the poor lady.

"You have indeed given us a dramatic entertainment, dear Mrs. Hardacre," Lady FitzHubert had said with a sympathetic smile. "And poor Norma has supplied the curtain. I hope she won't take it too much to heart."

And Mrs. Hardacre, livid with rage, had had no weapon wherewith to strike her adversary who thus took triumphant vengeance. It had been a half-hour of grievous humiliation. The fount and origin thereof was lying unconscious with a bullet through his shoulder. The subsidiary stream, so to speak, was in her room safe and sound. Human nature, for which she is not deserving of over-blame, had driven Mrs. Hardacre thither. At least she could vent some of her pent-up fury upon her outrageous daughter, who, from Mrs. Hardacre's point of view, indeed owed an explanation of her action and deserved maternal censure. This she was more than prepared to administer. But when she heard Norma calmly say that Lady FitzHubert and the other delighted wreakers of private revenges were entirely in the right, she gasped with amazement.

"That beast!" she repeated with a rising intonation.

Norma gave her habitual shrug of the shoulders. With her proud, erect bearing, it was a gesture not ungraceful.

"Considering what I have just admitted, mother, perhaps it would be in better taste not to use such language."

"I don't understand your admitting it. I don't know what on earth you mean," said Mrs. Hardacre.

There was a short pause, during which she scanned her

daughter's face anxiously as if waiting to see a gleam of reason dawn on it. Norma reflected for a moment. Should she speak or not? She decided to speak. Brutal frankness had ever been her best weapon against her mother. It would probably prevent future wrangling.

"I am sorry I have n't made my meaning clear," she said, resuming her seat by the window; "and I don't know whether I can make it much clearer. Anyhow, I 'll try, mother. I used to think that love was either a school-girl sentimentality, a fiction of the poets, or else the sort of thing that lands married women who don't know how to take care of themselves in the divorce court. I find it is n't. That 's all."

Mrs. Hardacre ran up to the window and faced Norma.

"And Morland?"

"It won't break his heart."

"What won't?"

"The breaking off of our engagement."

Mrs. Hardacre looked at her daughter in a paralysis of bewilderment.

"The madhouse is the only place for you."

"Perhaps it is. Anyway I can't marry a man when I care for his intimate friend — and when the intimate friend cares for me. Somehow it 's not quite decent. Even you, mother, can see that."

"So you and the intimate friend have arranged it all between you?"

"Oh, no. He does n't know that I care, and he does n't know that I know that he cares. I 'll say that over again if you like. It is quite accurately expressed. And you know I 'm not in the habit of lying."

"And you propose to marry —"

"I don't propose to do anything," interrupted Norma, quickly. "I at least can wait till he asks me. And now, mother, I 've had rather a bad time — don't you think we might stop?"

"It seems to me, my dear Norma, we are only just beginning," said Mrs. Hardacre.

Norma rose with nervous impatience.

"O heavens, mother," she said, in the full deep notes of her voice, which were only sounded at rare moments of feeling, "can't you see that I 'm in earnest? This man is like no one else I have ever met. I have grown to need him. Do you know what that means? With him I am a changed woman — as God made me, I suppose; natural, fresh, real —" Mrs. Hardacre sat in Norma's vacated chair by the window and stared at her, as she moved about the room. "I somehow feel that I am a woman, after all. I have got something higher than myself that I can fall at the feet of, and that 's what every woman craves when she 's decent. As for marrying him — I 'm not fit to marry him. There is n't any one living who is. That 's an end of it, mother. I can't say anything more."

"And do you propose to go on seeing this person when he recovers?" asked Mrs. Hardacre.

"Why not?"

"I really can't argue with you," said her mother, mystified. "If you had told me this rubbish yesterday, I should have thought you touched in your wits. To-day it is midsummer madness."

"Why to-day?" asked Norma.

"The man has shown himself to be such a horrible beast. Of course, if you think confessing to having seduced a girl under infamous circumstances and driven her by his

brutality to child-murder and suicide, and blazoning the whole thing out at a fashionable garden-party and getting himself shot for his pains, are idyllic virtues, nothing more can be said. It 's a case, as I remarked, for a madhouse."

Norma came and stood before her mother, her brows knitted in perplexity.

"Perhaps I am going crazy — I really don't understand what you are talking about."

Mrs. Hardacre leant forward in her chair and drew a long breath. A gleam of intelligence came into her eyes as she looked at Norma.

"Do you mean to say you don't know what the row was about before the man fired the shot?"

"No," said Norma, blankly.

Her mother fell back in her chair and laughed. It was the first moment of enjoyment she had experienced since Stone's black figure had appeared on the terrace. Reaction from strain caused the laughter to ring somewhat sharply. Norma regarded her with an anxious frown.

"Please tell me exactly what you mean."

"My dear child — it 's too funny. I thought you would have been too clever to be taken in by a man like this. I see, you 've been imagining him a Galahad — a sort of spotless prophet — though what use you can have for such persons I can't make out. Well, this is what happened."

Embellishing the story here and there with little spiteful adornments, she described with fair accuracy, however, the scene that had occurred. Norma listened stonily.

"This is true?" she asked when her mother had finished.

"Ask any one who was there — your father — Morland."

"I can't believe it. He is not that sort of man."

"Is n't he? I knew he was the first time I set eyes on him. Perhaps another time you 'll allow me to have some sense — of course, if it is immaterial to you whether a man is a brute — What are you ringing the bell for?"

"I am going to ask Morland to come up here."

The maid appeared, received Norma's message, and retired. Norma sat by her little writing-table, with her head turned away from her mother, and there was silence between them till the maid returned.

"Mr. King has just driven off to catch the train, miss. He left a note for you."

Mrs. Hardacre listened with contracted brow. When the maid retired, she bent forward anxiously.

"What does he say?"

"You can read it, mother," replied Norma, wearily. She held out the note. Mrs. Hardacre came forward and took it from her hand and sat down again.

It ran:

"DEAR NORMA, — I think it best to run up to town on this afternoon's business. I have only just time to catch the train at Cosford, so you will forgive my not saying good-bye to you more ceremoniously. Take care of poor Jimmie.

"Yours affectionately,

"MORLAND."

"'Poor Jimmie,' indeed!" said Mrs. Hardacre, somewhat relieved at finding the note contained no reference to the part played by Norma. "It 's very good of Morland, but I wish he would not mix himself up in this scandal."

"I can't see what less he could do than look after his friend's interests," said Norma.

"I wish the man had been shot or hanged before he came down here," said Mrs. Hardacre, vindictively. "That 's the worst of associating with such riff-raff. One never knows what they will do. It will teach you not to pick people out of the gutter and set them in a drawing-room."

Mrs. Hardacre rose. She did not often have the opportunity of triumphing over her daughter. She crossed the room and paused for a moment by Norma, who sat motionless with her chin in her hand, apparently too dismayed to retort.

"I am glad to see symptoms of sanity," she remarked.

Norma brought down her hand hard upon the table and leaped to her feet and faced her mother.

"I tell you, it's impossible! Impossible! He is not that kind of man. It is some horrible mistake. I will ask him myself. I will get the truth from his own lips."

"You shall certainly do nothing of the kind," cried her mother; and in order to have the last word she went out and slammed the door behind her.

Norma sat by the window again. The red September sun was setting, and bathed downs and trees in warm light, and glinted on the spire of a little village church a mile away. Everything it touched was at peace, save the bowed head of the girl, clasped with white fingers which still retained the dull brown marks of blood. Could she believe the revolting story? A woman so driven to desperation must have been cruelly handled. Her sex rose up against the destroyer. Her social training had caused her to regard with cynical indifference ordinary breaches of what is

popularly termed the moral law. In the fast, idle set which she generally frequented it was as ordinary for a man to neigh after his neighbour's wife as to try to win his friend's money; as unsurprising for him to keep a mistress as a stud of race-horses; the crime was to marry her. But it was not customary, even in smart society, to drive women to murder their new-born babes and kill themselves. A callous brutality suggested itself, and the contemplation of it touched humanity, sex, essential things. Could she believe the story? She shuddered.

The dressing-gong sounded through the house. Her maid entered, drew the curtains, and lit the gas; then was dismissed. Norma would not go down to dinner. A little food and drink in her own room would be all that she could swallow.

Later, Connie Deering, who had changed her dress, tapped at the door and was bidden to enter. A quantity of powder vainly strove to hide the traces of recent tears on her pretty face. She was a swollen-featured, piteous little butterfly.

"How is he?" asked Norma.

"Better, much better. They have taken out the bullet. There is no danger, and he has recovered consciousness. I almost wish he had n't. Oh, Norma dear —"

She broke down and sat on the bed and sobbed. Norma came up and laid her hand on her shoulder.

"Surely you don't believe this ghastly story?"

The fair head nodded above the handkerchief. A voice came from below it.

"I must — it 's horrible — Jimmie, of all men! I thought his life was so sweet and clean — almost like a good woman's — I can't understand it. If he is as bad as

this, what must other men be like? I feel as if I shall never be able to look a man in the face again."

"But why should you take it for granted that he has done this?" asked Norma, tonelessly.

Mrs. Deering raised her face and looked at her friend in blue-eyed dismay.

"I did n't take it for granted. He told me so himself. Otherwise do you think I should have believed it?"

"He told you so himself! When?"

"A short while ago. I went into his room. I could n't help it — I felt as if I should have gone mad if I did n't know the truth. Parsons was there with him. She said I could come in. He smiled at me in his old way, and that smile is enough to make any woman fall in love with him. 'You 've been crying, Connie,' he said. 'That 's very foolish of you.' So I began to cry more. You would have cried if you had heard him. I asked him how he was feeling. He said he had never felt so well in his life. Then I blurted it out. I know I was a beast, but it was more than I could stand. 'Tell me that this madman's story was all lies.' He looked at me queerly, waited for a second or two, and then moved his head. 'It 's all true,' he said, 'all true.' 'But you must have some explanation!' I cried. He shut his eyes as if he were tired and said I must take the facts as they were. Then Parsons came up and said I must n't excite him, and sent me out of the room. But I did n't want to hear any more. I had heard enough, had n't I?"

Norma, as she listened to the little lady's tale, felt her heart grow cold and heavy. Doubt was no longer possible. The man himself had spoken. He had not even pleaded extenuating circumstances; had merely admitted the plain,

brutal facts. He had gone under a feigned name, seduced an honest girl, abandoned her, driven her to tragedy. It was all too simple to need explanation.

"But what are we to do, dear?" cried Connie, as Norma made no remark, but stood motionless and silent.

"I think we had better drop his acquaintance," she replied with bitter irony.

Connie flinched at the tone, being a tender-natured woman. She retorted with some spirit:

"I don't believe you have any heart at all, Norma. And I thought you cared for him."

"You thought I cared for him?" Norma repeated slowly and cuttingly while her eyes hardened. "What right had you to form such an opinion?"

"People can form any opinions they like, my dear," said Connie. "That was mine. And on the terrace this afternoon you know you cared. If ever a woman gave herself away over a man, it was Norma Hardacre."

"It was n't Norma Hardacre, I assure you. It was a despicable fool whom I will ask you to forget. My mother was for putting it into a madhouse. She was quite right. Anyhow it has ceased to exist and I am the real Norma Hardacre again. Humanity is afflicted, it seems, periodically with a peculiar disease. It turns men into beasts and women into idiots. I have quite recovered, my dear Connie, and if you 'll kindly go down and ask them to keep dinner back for five minutes, I 'll dress and come down."

She rang the bell for her maid. Connie rose from the bed. She longed to make some appeal to the other's softer nature for her own sake, as she had held Jimmie very dear and felt the need of sympathy in her trouble and disillusion.

But knowing that from the rock of that cynical mood no water would gush forth for any one's magic, she recognised the inefficacy of her own guileless arts, and forbore to exercise them. She sighed for answer. By chance her glance fell upon Norma's skirt. Human instinct, not altogether feminine, seized upon the trivial.

"Why, whatever have you been doing to your dress?"

Norma looked down, and for the first time noticed the disfiguring smears of blood.

"I must have spilt something," she said, turning away quickly, and beginning to unfasten the hooks and eyes of her neckband.

"I hope it will come out," said Connie. "It 's such a pretty frock."

As soon as she was alone, Norma looked at the stains with unutterable repulsion. She tore off the dress feverishly and threw it into a corner. When her maid entered in response to her summons, she pointed to the shapeless heap of crêpe and embroidery.

"Take that away and burn it," she said.

Chapter XVI

IN THE WILDERNESS

NORMA went down to dinner resolved to present a scornful front to public opinion. She found the effort taxed her strength. During the night her courage deserted her. The cold glitter of triumph in her mother's eyes had been intolerable. Her father, generally regarded with contemptuous indifference, had goaded her beyond endurance with his futile upbraiding. Aline had arrived, white-faced and questioning, and had established herself by Jimmie's bedside. Norma shrank from the ordeal of the daily meeting with her and the explanation that would inevitably come. She dreaded the return of Morland, uncertain of her own intentions. As she tossed about on her pillow, she loathed the idea of the marriage. Innermost sex had spoken for one passionate moment, and its message still vibrated. She knew that time might dull the memory; she knew that her will might one day triumph over such things as sex and sentiment; but she must have a breathing space, a period of struggle, of reflection, above all, of disassociation from present surroundings. If she sold herself, it must be in the accustomed cold atmosphere of brain and heart. Not now, when her head burned and flaming swords were piercing her through and through. And last, and chief of all her dreads, was the wounded man now sleeping

beneath that roof. Father, mother, Aline, Morland — these, torture though it were, she could still steel her nerves to meet; but him, never. He had done what no other man in the wide world had done. He had awakened the sleeping, sacredest inmost of her, and he had dealt it a deadly wound. If she could have consumed him and all the memories surrounding him with fire, as she had consumed the garment stained with his blood, she would have done so in these hours of misery. And fierce among the bewildering conflict of emotions that raged through the long night was one that filled her with overwhelming disgust — a horrible, almost grotesque jealousy of the dead girl.

In the morning, exhausted, she resolved on immediate flight. In the little village of Penwyrn on the Cornish coast, her aunt Janet Hardacre led a remote, Quakerish existence. The reply to a telegram before she left her room assured Norma of a welcome. By eleven o'clock she had left Heddon Court and was speeding westwards without a word to Jimmie or Aline.

Morland returned in the afternoon, and after a whisky and soda to brace his nerves, at once sought Jimmie, who roused himself with an effort to greet his visitor.

"Getting on famously, I hear," said Morland, with forced airiness. "So glad. We 'll have you on your feet in a day or two."

"I hope to be able to travel back to London to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes," said Jimmie, with a curious smile. "I fear I have outstayed my welcome."

"Not a bit of it," said Morland, seating himself at the foot of the bed. "We 'll put all that right. But you will

give one a little time, won't you? You must n't think you 've been altogether left. I ran up to town at once to see my solicitors — not my usual people, you know, but some others, devilish smart fellows at this sort of thing. They 'll see that nothing gets into the beastly papers."

"I don't see that it matters much," said Jimmie.

"Why, of course it does. I 'm not going to let you take the whole blame. I could n't come forward yesterday, it was all so sudden. The scandal would have rotted my election altogether. But you shall be cleared — at any rate in the eyes of this household. I came down with the intention of telling Norma, but she has bolted to Cornwall. Upset, I suppose. However, as soon as she comes back —"

"Let things be as they are," interrupted Jimmie, closing his eyes for a moment wearily, for he had been suffering much bodily pain. "When I said I was David Rendell, I meant it. I can go on acting the part. It 's pretty easy."

"Impossible, my dear old chap," said Morland, with an air of heartiness. "You went into the affair with your eyes shut. You did n't know it was such a horrible mess."

"All the more reason for Norma to remain ignorant. It was for her sake as well as yours."

A peculiar tenderness in Jimmie's tone caused Morland, not usually perceptive, to look at him sharply.

"You are very keen upon Norma," he remarked.

Jimmie closed his eyes again, and smiled. He was very weak and tired. The pain of his wound and a certain mental agitation had kept him awake all night, and just before Morland entered he had been dropping off to sleep

for the first time. An unconquerable drowsiness induced irresponsibility of speech.

"'The desire of the moth for the star,'" he murmured.

Morland slid from the bed to his feet, and with his hands in his pockets gazed in astonishment at his friend. An entirely novel state of affairs dawned upon him which required a few moments to bring into focus. The ghastly tragedy for which he was responsible, presenting itself luridly at every instant of the night and day, had hidden from his reminiscent vision Norma's rush down the slope and her scared tending of the unconscious man. Jimmie's words brought back the scene with unpleasant vividness and provided the interpretation. When he saw this clearly, he was the most amazed man in the three kingdoms. That Jimmie should have conceived and nourished a silly, romantic passion for Norma, although he had never interested himself sufficiently in Jimmie's private affairs to suspect it, was humorously comprehensible. Ludicrously incomprehensible, however, was a reciprocation of the sentiment on the part of Norma. In spite of remorse, in spite of anxiety, in spite of the struggle between cowardice and manhood, his uppermost sensation at that moment was one of lacerated vanity. He had been hoodwinked, befooled, deceived. His own familiar friend had betrayed him; the woman he was about to honour with his name had set him at naught. He tingled with anger and sense of wrong.

The sick man opened his eyes drowsily, and seeing Morland's gaze full upon him, started into wakefulness. He motioned him to come nearer.

"If you marry Norma —" he began.

"If I marry her!" cried Morland. "Of course I'm

going to marry her. I'll see any other man damned before he marries her! She's the only woman in the world I've ever set my mind on, and no matter what happens, I'm going to marry her. There are no damned if's about it."

"Yes, there are," Jimmie retorted weakly. "I was going to preach, but I'm too tired. You'll have to be especially good to her — to make up."

"For what?"

"For the wrong done to the other."

Morland was silent. He went up to the window and stared out across the lawns and tugged at his moustache. The reproach stung him, and he felt that Jimmie was ungenerous. After all, he had only done what thousands of other men had done with impunity. The consequences had been enough to drive him mad, but they had been the hideous accident of a temperament for which he had not been responsible.

"You surely don't believe all that mad fool said yesterday?" he muttered without turning round.

"The promise of marriage?"

"It's a crazy invention. There never was any question of marriage. I told you so months ago. I did everything in my power."

"I'm glad," said Jimmie.

Morland made no reply, but continued to stare out of the window and meditate upon the many injuries that fate had done him. He arraigned himself before the bar of his wounded vanity. He had broken the moral law and deserved a certain penalty. The magnanimous verdict received the applause of an admiring self. He was willing to undergo an adequate punishment — the imposition

of a fine and the hard labour of setting devious things straight. But the alternative sentence to which he saw himself condemned — on the one hand, the ruin of his political career, his social position, and his marriage with Norma, to all of which he clung with a newly found passion, and on the other, ignoble shelter behind an innocent man who had done him a great wrong — he rebelled against with all his average, sensual Briton's sense of justice. It was grossly unfair. If there had been a spiritual "Times," he would have written to it.

The opening of the door caused him to turn round with a start. It was Aline, anxious and pale from an all-night sitting by Jimmie's bedside, but holding her slim body erect, and wearing the uncompromising air of a mother who has found her child evilly entreated at the hands of strangers. She glanced at the bed and at Morland; then she put her finger to her lip, and pointed at Jimmie, who lay fast asleep. Morland nodded and went on tiptoe out of the room. Aline looked round, and being a sensitive young person, shivered. She threw open the window wide, as if to rid the place of his influence. Jimmie stirred slightly. She bent down and kissed his hair.

During the dark and troubled time that followed, Morland fell away from Jimmie like the bosom friend of a mediæval artist stricken with the Black Death. At first, common decency impelled him to send the tainted one affectionate messages, invitations to trust him awhile longer, and enlarged, with the crudity of his mental habit, on the noble aspects of Jimmie's sacrifice. But after Jimmie left the Hardacres' house, which happened as soon as he could bear the journey, Morland shrank from meeting him face

to face; and when public exposure came, the messages and the invitations and the protestations ceased, and Jimmie was left in loneliness upon a pinnacle of infamy. Morland, in the futile hope of the weak-willed man that he could, by some astonishing chance, sail a middle course, did indeed give himself peculiar pains to keep the story out of the newspapers, and his ill-success was due to other causes than his own lack of effort. It was a tale too picturesque to be wasted in these days of sensation-hunger. The fact of the dénouement of the tragedy having taken place in the presence of royalty lent it a theatrical glamour. A sardonic press filled an Athenian public with what it lusted after. Indeed, who shall say with authority that the actual dramas re-enacted before our courts and reported in our newspapers have not their value in splashing with sudden colour the drab lives of thousands? May it not be better for the dulled soul to be occasionally arrested by the contemplation of furious passions than to feed contentedly like a pig beside the slaughtered body of its fellow?

Be that as it may. The press paid no heed to Morland or the smart fellows of solicitors whom he employed. It published as many details as it could discover or invent. For the tragical business did not end with the scene on the Hardacres' lawn. There was an inquest on the dead girl. There was the trial of Daniel Stone for attempted murder. The full glare of publicity shed itself upon the sordid history. In the one case the jury gave a verdict of suicide during temporary insanity; in the other the prisoner was found to be insane and was sent to an asylum. These were matters of no great public interest. But letters to the dead girl in a disguised handwriting were discovered, and Stone gave his crazy evidence, and a story of heartless

seduction under solemn promise of marriage, and of abandonment with cynical offer of money was established, and the fashionable portrait-painter, who was supposed to be the hero of the tale, awoke one morning and found himself infamous. The thing, instead of remaining a mere police-court commonplace, became a society scandal. Exaggeration was inevitable, not only of facts but of the reprobation a virtuous community pronounces on the specially pilloried wrongdoer. The scapegoat in its essential significance is by no means a thing of legendary history. It exists still, and owes its existence to an ineradicable instinct in human nature. The reprobation aforesaid is due not entirely to hypocrisy, as the social satirist would have it, but in a great measure to an unreasoning impulse towards expiation of offences by horrified condemnation of some notorious other. Thus it came to pass that upon Jimmie's head were put all the iniquities of the people and all their transgressions in all their sins, and he was led away into the social wilderness. After that, the world forgot him. He had been obscure enough before he burst for a day into the blaze of royal patronage; but now blackest darkness swallowed him up. Only Aline remained by his side.

Morland wrote to Jimmie once after the exposure. As he had been the cause, said he, of the probable ruin of Jimmie's professional prospects, it was only right that he should endeavour to make some compensation. It was, besides, a privilege of their life-long friendship. He enclosed a cheque for two thousand pounds. Jimmie returned it.

"My dear Morland," he wrote in answer, "loyalty can only be repaid by loyalty, love by love. If I accepted

money, it would dishonour both yourself and me. It is true that I took upon me a greater burden than I was aware of. The world, if it knew the facts, would, as you say, call me a quixotic fool. But if I took your money it would have the right to call me a mercenary knave. I have always suffered fools gladly, myself the greatest. I can go on doing so. Meanwhile you can make full compensation in the only way possible. Devote your life and energies to the happiness of the woman you are about to marry."

This was a stern letter for Jimmie to write. After he had posted it he reproached himself for not having put in a kind word.

Chapter XVII

THE INCURABLE MALADY

"I 'LL never let you inside the house again until you go down on your knees and beg Jimmie's pardon," cried Aline.

She stood, a slim incarnation of outraged womanhood, with her hand on the knob of the open door. A scared but stubborn youth hesitated on the threshold. Few men, least of all lovers, like being turned out.

"I don't believe you care a hang for me!" he said.

"I don't," she retorted bravely, but with tremulous lip. "Not a hang, as you call it. I dislike you exceedingly and I don't want to see you any more. I 'll never speak to anybody who believes such things of Jimmie."

"But, my good child," expostulated Tony Merewether, "they are facts; he never has denied them."

"He could if he liked."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know?" Aline repeated scornfully. "That just shows how far we are apart. There 's not the slightest reason for talking any more. You have insulted Jimmie and you are going on insulting him. I can't stand by this door forever. I want you to go."

"Oh, very well, I 'll go," said the young fellow. "But you 've behaved damnably to me, Aline — simply damnably."

He strode down the passage and slammed the front door behind him. Aline turned back into the prim little drawing-

room where the interview had taken place, and after an attempt to remain composed and dignified, suddenly broke into tears. She could struggle no more against the cruelty of man and the hopelessness of life. It had been a stormy interview. Tony Merewether had come, as her natural protector, to insist upon immediate marriage. A small legacy recently bequeathed to him would enable them to marry with reasonable prudence. Why should they wait? Aline pleaded for time. How could she leave her beloved Jimmie in his blackest hour?

"It's just because I don't think it quite right for you to live here any longer, that I want you to come away at once," Tony had said.

"Not right to live here? What on earth do you mean?"

The luckless lover tried to explain. Aline regarded him icily, and in his confusion and discomfiture he lost the careful wrappings which he had prepared for his words.

"You think that Jimmie is not a fit person for me to associate with?" she had asked in a dangerous tone.

"Yes, since you choose to put it that way," he had replied, nettled. He believed that women liked a man of spirit and generally yielded to a show of masterfulness. He was very young. Taking up his parable with greater confidence, he showed her the social and moral necessity of immediate recourse to his respectable protection. Naturally he admired her loyalty, he signified, with a magnanimous wave of the hand; but there were certain things girls did not quite comprehend; a man's judgment had to be trusted. He invited her to surrender entirely to his wisdom. The end of it all was his ignominious dismissal. She would not see him until he had begged Jimmie's pardon on his knees.

But now she buried her face in the sofa-cushions and sobbed. It was her first poignant disillusion. Tony, whom she loved with all her heart, was just like everybody else, incapable of pure faith, ready to believe the worst. He was cruel, uncharitable. She would never speak to him again. And the sweet shy dream of her young life was over. It was very tragical.

Jimmie's step coming up the studio stairs caused her to spring from the sofa and frantically dry her eyes before the mirror. The steps advanced along the passage, and soon Jimmie's head appeared at the door.

"Where have you hidden the little watercolour box?" he asked cheerily.

"In the cupboard. On the second shelf," she replied, without turning round.

He caught sight of the reflection of a tear-stained face, and came and stood by her side.

"Why, you 've been crying!"

"I suppose I have," she admitted with affectionate defiance, looking up into his face. "Why should n't I, if I like? It 's not a crime."

"It 's worse — it 's a blunder," he quoted with a smile. "It can't do any one any good, and it makes your pretty nose red. That will spoil your good looks."

"I wish it would. My looks will never matter to anybody," she said desperately.

He put his arm round her shoulders, just as he had done since she could remember.

"What has happened to distress you — more than usual?" he added.

She was silent for a moment, and hung her head.

"I 've broken off with Tony," she said in a low voice.

"You 'll mend it up with Tony at once, my dear."

"I 'll never marry him," declared Aline.

"You 'll write and tell him that you 'll marry him at the very first opportunity. There are reasons why you should, Aline, grave reasons."

"You would n't have me marry any one I dislike intensely?" she flashed.

"Would n't you do it to please me, even though you hated him violently? I have been going to speak to you about this. It's high time you were married, dear, and I particularly wish it. So make friends with Tony as soon as ever you can."

"I never want to see Tony again — until he has gone on his bended knees to you," said Aline, with a quivering lip. "I don't want to breathe the same air with any one who does n't think of you as I do."

This was the first allusion that the girl had made to unhappy things, since they had become common knowledge a month ago. She had conveyed to him by increased tenderness and devotion that she loved him all the more for his suffering, and it had been easy for him to perceive that the main facts of the story were not unknown to her. But hitherto there had been absolute silence on the part of each. He had been greatly puzzled as to the proper course he should take. An interview with Tony Merewether that morning had decided him. It had been short, coldly courteous on the young fellow's side, who merely asked and obtained consent to marry Aline forthwith, and wistfully dignified on Jimmie's.

He sat down on the arm of a chair and took her hand, deeply moved by her passionate faith in him.

"Listen, dear. I am a dishonoured man and it is n't

right that you should live with me any longer. Tony, dear good fellow, is no more to blame for what he thinks of me than the crazy wronged man who shot me. But the only way for you to make him think better is to marry him. No, don't interrupt. Stand quietly and let me talk to you. I've been making plans and I should be tremendously upset if there was any difficulty. I'm going to give up the house and studio."

Aline regarded him in frightened amazement, and then looked round as if the familiar walls and furniture were in danger of incontinent disappearance.

"What?" she gasped.

"I shall give it up and wander about painting abroad, so it's absolutely necessary that you should marry Tony. Otherwise I don't know what on earth I should do with you."

He swung her hand and looked smilingly into her eyes.

"You see I really am in a hurry to get rid of you," he added.

Aline gazed at him for a long time, gradually recovering from her stupefaction. Then she withdrew her hand from his clasp and laughed.

"You are talking unadulterated rubbish, Jimmie," she said.

Upon this declaration she took her stand, and no protest or argument could move her. She withstood triumphantly a siege of several days. Jimmie tried to exert his quasi-parental authority. But the submissive little girl, who had always yielded when Jimmie claimed obedience, had given place to a calmly inflexible woman. Jimmie swore that he would not commit the crime of spoiling her life's happiness. She replied, with a toss of her head and a pang of her heart, that her life's happiness had nothing to do with Tony Mere-

wether, and that if it did, the crime would lie at his door and not at Jimmie's.

"As for leaving you alone in the wide world, I would just as soon think of deserting a new-born baby in the street," she said. "You are not fit to be by yourself. And whether you like it or not, Jimmie, I must stay and look after you."

At last, by the underhand methods which women often employ for the greater comfort of men, she cajoled him into an admission. The plan of giving up the house had, as its sole object, the forcing of her hand. Victorious, she allowed herself to shed tears over his goodness. Just for her miserable sake he had proposed to turn himself into a homeless wanderer over the face of Europe.

"Do tell me, Jimmie," she said, "how it feels to be an angel!"

He laughed in his old bright way.

"Very uncomfortable when a tyrannical young woman cuts your wings off."

"But I do it for your good, Jimmie," she retorted. "If I did n't, you would be flying about helplessly."

Thus the clouds that lay around them were lit with tender jesting. During this passage through the darkness he never faltered, serene in his faith, having found triumphant vindication thereof in the devotion of Aline. That he had made a sacrifice greater than any human being had a right to demand of another, he knew full well; he had been driven on to more perilous reefs than he had contemplated; the man whom he had imagined Morland to be would have thrown all planks of safety to the waves in order to rescue him. He felt acutely the pain of his shipwreck; but he did not glorify himself as a martyr: he was satisfied that it was

for the worshipped woman's happiness, and that in itself was a reward. His catholic sympathy even found extenuating circumstances in Morland's conduct. Once when Aline inveighed against his desertion, he said in the grave manner in which he delivered himself of his moral maxims:

"We ought never to judge a human being's actions until we know his motives."

Aline thought the actions were quite sufficient for a working philosophy, but she did not say so. Jimmie half guessed the motives and judged leniently. Though he had lost much that made life sweet to him, his heart remained unchanged, his laugh rang true through the house; and were it not for the loneliness and the dismal blight in her own little soul, Aline would not have realised that any calamitous event had happened.

One other of Jimmie's friends maintained relations with him. This was Connie Deering. She had gone abroad soon after the disaster, and moved by various feelings for which she rather forbade her impulsive self to account, had written one or two oddly expressed letters. In the first one she had touched lightly upon the difficult subject. She would not have believed a word of it, if she had not heard it from his own lips. If he would write to her and say that it was all a lie, she would accept his word implicitly. He was either a god or a devil — a remark that filled Jimmie with considerable alarm. A shrewd brain was inside the pretty butterfly head. In his reply he ignored the question, an example which Connie followed in her second letter. This consisted mainly in a rambling account of the beauty of Stresa and the comforts and excellent cuisine of the hotel by the lake; but a postscript informed

him that Norma was travelling about with her for an indefinite period, and that she had heard nothing of Morland, who having easily won his election was now probably busy with the beginning of the autumn session. Jimmie, unversed in the postscriptal ways of women, accepted the information as merely the literal statement of facts. A wiser man would have grasped the delicate implication that the relations between the affianced pair were so strained that an interval of separation had seemed desirable.

The unshaken faith of the man in the ultimate righteousness of things kept him serene; but the young girl who had no special faith, save in the perfect righteousness of Jimmie and the dastardly unrighteousness of the world in general and of Mr. Anthony Merewether in particular, found it difficult to live in these high altitudes of philosophy. Indeed she was a very miserable little girl when Jimmie was not by, and pined, and cried her heart out, and grew thin and pale and sharp-tempered, and filled her guardian with much concern. At last Jimmie took heroic measures. Without Aline's knowledge he summoned Tony Merewether to an interview. The young man came. Jimmie received him in the studio, begged him to take a seat, and rang the bell. The middle-aged housekeeper ran down in some perturbation at the unusual summons, for it was Jimmie's habit to shout up the stairs, generally to Aline, for anything he wanted. She received his instructions. Miss Aline would oblige him by coming down at once. During the interval of waiting he talked to Mr. Merewether of indifferent things, flattering himself on a sudden development of the diplomatic faculty. Aline ran into the room, and stopped short at the sight of the young man, uttering a little cry of indignant surprise. Jimmie cleared his throat, but the oration

that he had prepared was never delivered. Aline marched straight up to the offending lover.

"I don't see you on your knees," she said.

Tony, who was entirely unexpectant of this uncompromising attitude, having taken it for granted that by some means or other the way had been made smooth for him, retorted somewhat sharply:

"You 're not likely to."

"Then I wonder," said Aline, "at your audacity in coming to this house." She turned and marched back to the door, her little figure very erect and her dark eyes blazing. Jimmie intercepted her.

"Tony came at my request, my child."

For the first and only time in her life she cast a look of anger upon Jimmie.

"Let me pass, please," she said, like an outraged princess; and waving Jimmie aside, she made the exit of offended majesty.

The two men looked stupidly at each other. Their position was ignominious.

"I did it for the best, my boy," said Jimmie, taking up a pipe which he began to fill mechanically. He was just the kind creature of happier days. The young fellow's heart was touched. After a minute's silence he committed a passionate indiscretion.

"I wish to God you would tell me there is something hidden beneath this ghastly story, and that it 's quite different from what it appears to be!"

Jimmie drew himself up and looked the young man between the eyes.

"That 's a question I discuss with no human being," said he.

"I beg your pardon," said Tony Merewether, in sincere apology. "I would not have taken such a liberty if it had n't been a matter of life and death for me. Perhaps you think I ought to do more or less as Aline asks me; but she is too precious to purchase with an infernal lie. I 'm hanged if I 'll do it, and I don't think you 're the man to misunderstand my frankness."

Jimmie had lit his pipe during the foregoing speech. He drew two or three meditative puffs.

"Have as little to do with lies, my boy, as ever you can," said he. "And cheer up, all is sure to come right in the end."

He was sunk in reflection for a long time after the young man had gone, and again for a long time after Aline had done remorseful penance for her loss of temper. Then he went out for a walk and brought back something in his pocket. At dinner-time he was unusually preoccupied. When the meal was over, he fished up a black bottle from beneath the table, and going to the sideboard, came back with a couple of wineglasses. Aline watched him as though he were performing some rite in black magic.

"This is rich fruity port," said he, filling the glasses. "Evans, the grocer, told me I should get nothing like it at the price in London. You are to drink it. It will do you good."

Aline, still penitent, obeyed meekly.

"How could you be so extravagant, Jimmie?" she said in mild protest. "It must have cost quite three shillings."

"And sixpence," said Jimmie, unabashed. He lifted up his glass. "Now here 's to our *Wanderjahr*, or as much of it as we can run to."

"Whatever do you mean, Jimmie?"

"I mean, my dear," said he, "that we are going to take a knapsack, a tambourine and a flute, and appropriate ribbons for our costumes, and beg our way through southern Europe."

He explained and developed his plan, the result of his meditations, in his laughing picturesque way. They were doing nothing but eating expensive fog in November London. A diet of sunshine and garlic would be cheaper. They would walk under the olive-trees and drift about on lagoons, and whisper with dead ages in the moonlit gloom of crumbling palaces. They would go over hills on donkeys. They would steep their souls in Perugino, Del Sarto, Giorgione. They would teach the gaunt Italian flea to respect British Keating's powder. They would fraternise with the beautiful maidens of Arles and sit on the top of Giotto's Campanile. They would do all kinds of impossible things. Afford it? Of course they could. Had he not received his just dues from the princess and sold two pictures a week or two ago? At this point he fell thinking for a couple of dreamy minutes.

"I meant to give you a carriage, dear," he said at last in mild apology. "I'm afraid it will have to be a third-class one."

"A fourth or fifth would be good enough for me," cried Aline. "Or I could walk all the way with you. Don't I know you have planned it out just for my sake?"

"Rubbish, my dear," said Jimmie, holding the precious wine to the light. "I'm taking you because I don't see how I can leave you behind. You have no idea what an abominable nuisance you'll be."

Aline laughed a joyous laugh which did Jimmie good to hear, and came behind his chair and put her arms about his

neck, behaving foolishly as a young girl penetrated with the sense of the loved one's goodness is privileged to do. What she said is of infinitesimal importance, but it lifted care from Jimmie's heart and made him as happy as a child. Like two children they discussed the project; and Aline fetching from the top shelf of the bookcase in Jimmie's bedroom a forlorn, dusty, yellow-paged Continental Bradshaw, twenty years old, they looked up phantom trains that had long ceased running, speculated on the merits of dead-and-gone hotels, and plunged into the fairy-land of anachronistic information.

A few days were enough for Jimmie's simple arrangements; and then began the pilgrimage of these two, each bearing a burden, a heart-ache, a pain from which there was no escaping, but each bearing it with a certain splendour of courage that made life beautiful to the other. For the girl suffered keenly, as Jimmie knew. She had given a passionate heart for good and all to the handsome young fellow who had refused to bow the knee to the man whom he had every reason to consider a blackguard. They had come together, youth to youth, as naturally as two young birds in the first mating-season; but, fortunately or unfortunately for Aline, she was not a bird, but a human being of unalterable affections and indomitable character. She had the glorious faith, *quia incredibile*, in Jimmie, and rather than swerve aside from it she would have walked on knife edges all the rest of her days. So she scorned the pain, and scorned herself for feeling it when she saw the serenity with which he bore his cross. Dimly she felt that if the truth were known he would stand forth heroically, not infamously. She had revered him as a child does its father; but in that sweet and pure relationship of

theirs, she had also watched him with the minute, jealous solicitude that a mother devotes to an only child who is incapable of looking after itself. Nothing in his character had escaped her. She knew both his strength and his enchanting weaknesses. To her trained eyes, he was all but transparent; and of late her quickened vision had read in letters of fire across his heart, "The desire of the moth for the star."

So they travelled through the world, hand in hand, as it were, and drank together of its beauty. They were memorable journeyings. Sleeping-cars and palatial hotels and the luxuries of modern travel were not for them. Aline, who knew that Jimmie, as far as he himself was concerned, would have slept upon wood quite as cheerfully as upon feathers, but for her sake would have royally commanded down, held the purse-strings and dictated the expenditure. They had long, wonderful third-class journeys, stopping at every wayside station, at each having some picturesque change of company in the ever-crowded, evil-smelling, wooden-seated compartment. She laughed at Jimmie's fears as to her discomfort; protested with energetic sincerity that this was the only way in the world to travel with enjoyment. It was a never-failing interest to see Jimmie disarm the suspicion of peasants by his sympathetic knowledge of their interests, to listen to his arguments with the chance-met curé, perspiring and polite, or the mild young soldier in a brass helmet a size too big for him. In France she understood what they were saying, and maintained a proper protectorate over Jimmie by means of a rough and ready acquaintance with the vernacular. But in Italy she was dumb, could only regard Jimmie in open-mouthed astonishment and admiration. He spoke Italian. She had

known him all her life and never suspected this accomplishment. It required some tact to keep him in his proper position as interpreter and restrain him from acting on his own initiative. In the towns they put up at little humble hostelries in by-streets and in country-places at rough inns, eating rude fare and drinking sour wine with great content. The more they economised the longer would the idyllic vagabondage last.

Through southern France and northern Italy they wandered without fixed plans, going from place to place as humour seized them, seeking the sunshine. At last it seemed to be their normal existence. London with its pain and its passion grew remote like the remembered anguish of a dream. Few communications reached them. The local newspaper gave them all the tidings they needed of the great world. It was a life free from vexation. The decaying splendour of the larger cities with their treasure-houses of painting and sculpture and their majestic palaces profoundly stirred the young girl's imagination and widened her conceptions and sympathies. But she loved best to arrive by a crazy, old-world diligence at some little townlet built on a sunny hillside, whose crumbling walls were the haunts of lizards and birds and strange wild-flowers; and having rested and eaten at the dark little *albergo*, smelling of wine and garlic and all Italian smells, to saunter out with Jimmie through the narrow, ill-paved, clattering streets alive with brown children and dark-eyed mothers, and men sitting on doorsteps violently gesticulating and screaming over the game of *morra*, and to explore the impossible place from end to end. A step or two when they desired it would bring them to the sudden peace of the mediæval church, with its memories of Romanesque tradi-

tion and faint stirrings of Gothic curiously reflecting the faith of its builders; the rough, weather-beaten casket of one flawless gem of art, a Virgin smiling over the child on her lap at many generations of worshippers, superbly eternal and yet quaintly woman. And then they would pass out of the chilly streets and down the declivitous pathways below the town and sit together on the hillside, in a sun-baked spot sheltered from the wind. This Aline, vaguely conscious of the Infinite, called "hanging on the edge of Nowhere."

One day, on such a hillside Jimmie had been painting three brown-faced children whom he had cajoled into posing for him, while Aline looked on dreamily. The urchins, dismissed with a few halfpennies, bowed polite thanks, the two boys taking off their caps with the air of ragged princes, and scampered away like rabbits out of sight.

"There!" cried Jimmie, throwing down his brush and holding out the little panel at arm's length. "I have never done anything so good in all my life! Have n't I got it? Is n't it better than ten cathedralfuls of sermons? Is n't it the quintessence of happiness, the perfect trust in the sweet earth to yield them its goodness? Could any one after seeing that dare say the world was only a dank and dismal prison where men do nothing but sit and hear each other groan? Look at it, Aline. What do you think of it?"

"It 's just lovely, Jimmie," said Aline.

"If I painted a pink hippopotamus standing on its head, you would say it was lovely. Why did n't you tell me that arm was out of drawing?"

He took up his brush and made the necessary correction. Aline laughed.

"Do you know one of the few things I can remember my father saying was about you?"

"God bless my soul," said Jimmie. "I had almost forgotten you ever had a father — dear old chap! What did he say?"

"I remember him telling you that one day you would die of incurable optimism. For years I used to think it was some horrible disease, and I used to whisper in my prayers, 'O God, please cure Jimmie of optimism,' and sometimes lie awake at nights thinking of it."

"Well, do you think your prayer has been answered?" asked Jimmie, amused.

She shifted herself a little nearer him and put her hand on his knee.

"Thank goodness, no. You 've got it as bad as ever — and I believe I 've caught it." Then, between a sob and a laugh, she added:

"Oh, Jimmie dear, your stupid old head could never tell you what you have done for me since we have been abroad. If I had stayed at home I think I should have died of — of — of malignant pessimism. You will never, never, never understand."

"And will you ever understand what you have done for me, my child?" said Jimmie, gravely. "We won't talk about these things. They are best in our hearts."

Chapter XVIII

A RUDDERLESS SHIP

THAT autumn pressed heavily upon Mrs. Hardacre. Norma's engagement, without being broken off, was indefinitely suspended, and Norma, by going abroad with Mrs. Deering immediately on her return from Cornwall, had placed herself beyond reach of maternal influence. It is true that Mrs. Hardacre wrote many letters; but as Norma's replies mainly consisted of a line or two on a picture post-card, it is to be doubted whether she ever read them. Mrs. Hardacre began to feel helpless. Morland could give her little assistance. He shrugged his shoulders at her appeals. He was perfectly determined to marry Norma, but trusted to time to restore her common-sense and lead her into the path of reason. Nothing that he could do would be of any avail. Mrs. Hardacre urged him to join the ladies on the Continent and bring matters to a crisis. He replied that an election was crisis enough for one man in a year, and furthermore the autumn session necessitated his attendance in the House. He was quite satisfied, he told her stolidly, with things as they were, and in the meantime was actually finding an interest in his new political life. But Mrs. Hardacre shared neither his satisfaction nor his interest, a mother's point of view being so different from that of a lover.

As if the loss of ducal favour and filial obedience were not enough for the distraught lady, her husband one morning threw a business letter upon the table, and with petulant curses on the heads of outside brokers, incoherently explained that he was ruined. They were liars and knaves and thieves, he sputtered. He would drag them all into the police court, he would write to the "Times," he would go and horsewhip the blackguards. Damme if he would n't!

"I wish the blackguards could hórsewhip you," remarked his wife, grimly. "Have you sufficient brains to realise what an unutterable fool you have been?"

If he did not realise it by the end of the week, it was not Mrs. Hardacre's fault. She reduced the unhappy man to craven submission and surreptitious nipping of old brandy in order to keep up the feeble spirit that remained in him, and took the direction of affairs into her own hands. They were not ruined, but a considerable sum of money had been lost through semi-idiotic speculation, and for a time strict economy was necessary. By Christmas the establishment in the country was broken up, a tenant luckily found for Heddon Court, and a small furnished house taken in Devonshire Place. These arrangements gave Mrs. Hardacre much occupation, but they did not tend to soften her character. When Norma came home, sympathetically inclined and honestly desirous to smooth down asperities — for she appreciated the aggravating folly of her father — she found her advances coldly repulsed.

"What is the good of saying you are sorry for me," Mrs. Hardacre asked snappishly, "when you refuse to do the one thing that can mend matters?"

Then followed the old, old story which Norma had heard so often in days past, but now barbed with a new moral and

adorned with new realism. Norma listened wearily, surprised at her own lack of retort. When the familiar homily came to an end, her reply was almost meek:

"Give me a little longer time to think over it."

"You had better cut it as short as possible," said Mrs. Hardacre, "or you may find yourself too late. As it is, you are going off. What have you been doing to yourself? You look thirty."

"I feel fifty," said Norma.

"You had better go and have your face massaged, or you 'll soon not be fit to be seen."

"I think I want a course of soul massage," answered Norma, with a hard little laugh.

But when she was alone in her own room, she looked anxiously at her face in the glass. Her mother had confirmed certain dismal imaginings. She had grown thinner, older looking; tiny lines were just perceptible at the corners of eyes and lips and across the forehead. The fresh bloom of youth was fading from her skin. She was certainly going off. She had not been a happy woman since her precipitate flight to Cornwall. The present discovery added anxiety to depression.

A day or two afterwards Mrs. Hardacre returned to the unedifying attack. Had Norma written to Morland to inform him of her arrival? Norma replied that she had no inordinate longing to see Morland. Mrs. Hardacre used language that only hardened and soured women of fashion who are beginning to feel the pinch of poverty dare use nowadays. It is far more virulent than a fishwife's, for every phrase touches a jangling nerve and every gibe tears a delicate fibre, whereas Billingsgate merely shocks and belabours. Norma bore it in silence for some time, and then went

away quivering from head to foot. A new and what seemed a horrible gift had been bestowed upon her — the power to feel. Once a sarcastic smile, a scornful glance, a withering retort would have carried her in triumph from her mother's presence. Secure in her own callous serenity, she would have given scarcely a further thought to the quarrel. Now things had inexplicably changed. Her mother's stabs hurt. Some curious living growth within her was wrung with pain. She could only grope humbled and broken to her room and stare at nothing, wishing she could cry like other women.

No wonder she looked old, when the spirit had left her and taken with it the cold, proud setting of the features that had given her beauty its peculiar stamp. Dimly she realised the disintegration. When a nature which has taken a colossal vanity for strength and has relied thereon unquestioningly for protection against a perilous world, once loses grip of that sublime mainstay, it is impossible for it to take firm hold again. It must content itself with lesser planks or flounder helplessly, fearful of imminent shipwreck. Norma, during those autumn months, had found her strength vanity. The fact in rude, symbolic form was brought home to her a short time after her return.

It was a bright Sunday afternoon, when, on her way to pay a call in Kensington, she had dismissed her cab at Lancaster Gate and was walking through Kensington Gardens. Half-way a familiar figure met her eye. It was her own maid sitting on a bench with a man by her side. The girl was wearing a cheap long jacket over an elaborate dress, absurdly light for the time of year. It caught Norma's attention, and then suddenly it flashed upon her that it was the dress she had given to be burned months

ago. She walked on, aching with a sense of the futility of grandiose determinations. She had consigned the garment stained with Jimmie's blood contemptuously to the flames. It was incongruously whole in Kensington Gardens. She had cast her love for Jimmie out of her heart in the same spirit of comedic tragedy. Forlorn and bedraggled it was still there, mockingly refusing to be reduced to its proper dust and ashes. Her strength had not availed her to cast it out. Her strength was a vain thing. Yet being forlorn and bedraggled the love was as hateful as the unconsumed garment. It haunted her like an unpurged offence. The newspaper details had made it reek disgustfully. At times Connie Deering's half faith filled her with an extravagant hope that these sordid horrors which had sullied the one pure and beautiful thing that had come into her life were nothing but a ghastly mistake; that it was, as Connie suggested, a dark mystery from which if Jimmie chose he could emerge clean. But then her judgment, trained from childhood to look below the surface of even smiling things and find them foul, rebelled. The man had proclaimed himself, written himself down a villain. It was in black and white. And not only a villain — that might be excusable — but a hypocritical canting villain, which was the unforgivable sin. Every woman has a Holy Ghost of sorts within her.

Norma did not write to Morland. She dreaded renewal of relations, and yet she had not the courage to cut him finally adrift. The thought of withered spinsterhood beneath her father's roof was a dismaying vision. Marriage was as essential as ever to the scheme of her future. Why not with Morland? Her mother's words, though spoken as with the tongues of asps, were those of wisdom.

All that she could bring to a husband was her beauty, her superb presence, her air of royalty. These gone, her chances were as illusory as those of the pinched and faded gentlewomen who tittle-tattled at Cosford tea-parties. Another year, and at the present rate of decay her beauty would have vanished into the limbo of last year's snows. She exaggerated; but what young woman of six-and-twenty placed as she has not looked tremulously in her mirror and seen feet of crows and heaven knows what imaginary fowls that prey upon female charms? At six-and-thirty she smiles with wistful, longing regret at the remembered image. Yet youth, happily, is not cognisant of youth's absurdities. It takes itself tragically. Thus did Norma. Her dowry of beauty was dwindling. She must marry within the year. Sometimes she wished that Theodore Weever, who had not yet discovered his decorative wife and had managed to find himself at various places which she had visited abroad, would come like a Paladin and deliver her from her distress and carry her off to his castle in Fifth Avenue. He would at least interest her as a human being, which Morland, with all his solid British qualities, had never succeeded in doing. But Theodore Weever had not spoken. He retained the imperturbability of the bald marble bust of himself that he had taken her to see in a Parisian sculptor's studio. There only remained Morland. But for some reason, for which she could not account, he seemed the last man on earth she desired to marry. When she had written to him, soon after her flight to Cornwall, to beg for a postponement of the wedding, giving him the very vaguest reasons for her request, he had assented with a cheerfulness ill befitting an impatient lover. It would be impertinence, he wrote, for him to enquire further into her

reasons. She was too much a woman of the world to act without due consideration, and provided that he could look forward to the very great happiness of one day calling her his wife, he was perfectly satisfied with whatever she chose to arrange. The absence of becoming fervour, in spite of her desire to postpone the dreaded day, produced a feeling of irritated disappointment. None of us, least of all women, invariably like to be taken at our word. If Morland lay so little value upon her as that, he might just as well give her up altogether. She replied impulsively, suggesting a rupture of the engagement. Morland, longing for time to raise him from the abasement in which he grovelled, had welcomed the proposal to defer the marriage; but as he smarted at the same time under a sense of wrong — had he not been betrayed by his own familiar friend and the woman he loved? — he now unequivocally refused to accept her suggestion. He had made up his mind to marry her. He had made all his arrangements for marrying her. The check he had experienced had stimulated a desire which only through unhappy circumstances had languished for a brief season. He persuaded himself that he was more in love with her than ever. At all costs, in his stupid, dogged way, he determined to marry her. He told her so bluntly. He merely awaited her good pleasure. Norma accepted the situation and thought, by going abroad, to leave it at home to take care of itself. It might die of inanition. Something miraculous might happen to transform it entirely. She returned and found it alive and quite undeveloped. It grinned at her with a leer which she loathed from the depths of her soul; and the more Mrs. Hardacre pointed at it the more it leered, and the greater became the loathing.

At last Mrs. Hardacre took matters into her own hands and summoned Morland to London. "Norma is in a green, depressed state," she wrote, "and I think your proper place is by her side. I imagine she regrets her foolishness in postponing the marriage and is ashamed to confess it. A few words with you face to face would bring her back to her old self. Women have these idiotic ways, my dear Morland, and men being so much stronger and saner must make generous allowances. I confidently expect you."

Morland's vanity, spurred by this letter, brought him in a couple of days to London.

"My dear Morland, this is a surprise," cried Mrs. Hardacre dissemblingly, as he entered the drawing-room, "we were only just talking of you. I 'll ring for another cup."

She moved to the bell by the side of the fireplace, and Norma and Morland shook hands with the conventional words of greeting.

"I hope you've had a good time abroad?"

"Oh, yes. The usual thing, the usual places, the usual people, the usual food. In fact, a highly successful pursuit of the usual. I've invented a verb — 'to usualise.' I suppose you've been usualising too?"

The sudden sight of him had braced her, and instinctively she had adopted her old, cool manner as defensive armour. Her reply pleased him. There was something pungent in her speech, irreconcilable in her attitude, which other women did not possess. He was not physiognomist or even perceptive enough to notice the subtle change in her expression. He noted, as he remarked to her later, that she was "a bit off colour," but he attributed it to

the muggy weather, and never dreamed of regarding her otherwise than as radically the same woman who had engaged herself to marry him in the summer. To him she was still the beautiful shrew whose taming appealed to masculine instincts. The brown hair sweeping up in a wave from the forehead, the finely chiselled sensitive features, the clear brown eyes, the mocking lips, the superb poise of the head, the stately figure perfectly set off in the dark blue tailor-made dress, all combined to impress him with a realisation of the queenliness of the presence that had grown somewhat shadowy of late to his unimaginative mental vision.

"And how do you like Parliament?" she asked casually, when the teacup had been brought and handed to him filled.

"I find it remarkably interesting," he replied sententiously. "It is dull at times, of course, but no man can sit on those green benches and not feel he is helping to shape the destinies of a colossal Empire."

"Is that what you really feel — or is it what you say when you are responding for the House of Commons at a public dinner?" asked Norma.

Morland hesitated for a moment between huffiness and indulgence. In spite of his former gibes at the stale unprofitableness of parliamentary-life, he had always had the stolid Briton's reverence for our Institutions, and now that he was actually a legislator, his traditions led him to take himself seriously.

"I have become a very keen politician, I assure you," he answered. "If you saw the amount of work that falls on me, you would be astonished. If it were n't for Manisty — that 's my secretary, you know — I don't see how I could get through it."

"I always wonder," said Mrs. Hardacre, "how members manage to find time for anything. They work like galley-slaves for nothing at all. I regard them as simply sacrificing themselves for the public good."

"A member of Parliament is the noblest work of God. Don't, mother. Please leave us our illusions."

"What are they?" asked Morland.

"One is that there are a few decently selfish people left in an age of altruists," said Norma.

She talked for the sake of talking, careless of the stupid poverty of her epigram. Morland, as the healthy country gentleman alternating with the commonplace man about town, was a passable type enough, though failing to excite exuberant admiration. But Morland, with his narrow range of sympathies and pathetic ignorance of the thought of the day, posing solemnly as a trustee of the British Empire, aroused a scorn which she dare not express in words.

"I don't know that we are all altruists," replied Morland, good-temperedly. "If we are good little members of Parliament, we may be rewarded with baronetcies and things. But one has to play the game thoroughly. It 's worth it, is n't it, even from your point of view, Norma?"

"You 're just the class of man the government does best in rewarding," remarked Mrs. Hardacre, with her wintry smile that was meant to be conciliatory. "A man of birth and position upholds the dignity of a title and is a credit to his party."

Morland laughingly observed that it was early in the day to be thinking of parliamentary honours. He had not even made his maiden speech. As Norma remained silent, the conversation languished. Presently Mrs. Hardacre rose.

"I have no doubt you two want to have a talk together. Won't you stay and dine with us, Morland?"

He glanced at Norma, but failing to read an endorsement of the invitation in her face, made an excuse for declining.

"Then I will say good-bye and leave you. I would n't stand any nonsense if I were you," she added in a whisper through the door which he held open for her.

He sauntered up to the fireplace and stood on the hearth-rug, his hands in his pockets. Norma, looking at him from her easy-chair, wondered at a certain ignobility that she detected for the first time beneath his bluff, prosperous air. In spite of birth and breeding he looked common.

"Well?" he said. "We had better have it out at once. What is it to be? I must have an answer sooner or later."

"Can't it be later?"

"If you insist upon it. I 'm not going to hold a pistol to your head, my dear girl. Only you must admit that I 've treated you with every consideration. I have n't worried you. You took it into your head to put off our marriage. I felt you had your reasons and I raised no objection. But we can't go on like this forever, you know."

"Why not?" asked Norma.

"Human nature. I am in love with you, and want to marry you."

"But supposing I am not in love with you, Morland. I 've never pretended to be, have I?"

"We need n't go over old ground. I accepted all that at the beginning. The present state of affairs is that we are engaged; when are we going to be married?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Norma, desperately. "I

have n't thought of it seriously. I know I have behaved like a beast to you — you must forgive me. At times it has seemed as though I was not the right sort to marry and bring children into the world. I should loathe it!"

"Oh, I don't think so," said Morland, in a tone he meant to be soothing. "Besides — "

"I know what you are going to say — or at any rate what you would like to say. It 's scarcely decent to talk of such things. But I have n't been brought up in a nunnery. I wish to God I had been. At all events, I am frank. I would loathe it — all that side of it. Could n't we suppress that side? Oh, yes, I am going to speak of it — it has been on my mind for months," she burst out, as Morland made a quick step towards her.

He did not allow her to continue. With his hand on the arm of her chair, he bent down over her.

"You are talking wild nonsense," he said; and she flushed red and did not meet his eyes. "When a man marries, he marries in the proper sense of the term, unless he is an outrageous imbecile. There is to be no question of that sort of thing. I thought you knew your world better. I want you — you yourself. Don't you understand that?"

Norma put out her hand to push him away. He seized it in his. She snatched it from him.

"Let me get up," she said, waving him off. She brushed past him, as she rose.

"We can't go on talking. What I 've said has made it impossible. Let us change the subject. How long are you going to stay in town?"

"I 'm not going to change the subject," said Morland, rather brutally. "I 'm far too much interested in it. Hang it all, Norma, you do owe me something."

"What do I owe you? What?" she asked with a sudden flash in her eyes.

"You are a woman of common-sense. I leave you to guess. You admit you have n't treated me properly. You have nothing to complain of as far as I am concerned. Now, have you?"

"How do I know? No. I suppose not, as things go. Once I did try to — to feel more like other women — and to make some amends. I told you that perhaps we were making a mistake in excluding sentiment. If you had chosen, you could have — I don't know — made me care for you, perhaps. But you did n't choose. You treated me as if I were a fool. Very likely I was."

"When was that?" asked Morland, with a touch of sarcasm. "I certainly don't remember."

"It was the last night we had any talk together — in the billiard-room. The night before — before the garden-party."

He turned away with an involuntary exclamation of anger. He remembered now, tragic events having put the incident out of his mind. He was caught in a trap.

"I did n't think you meant it," he said, hurrying to the base excuse. "Women sometimes consider it their duty to say such things — to act a little comedy, out of kindness. Some fellows expect it. I thought it would be more decent to let you see that I did n't."

There was a short silence. Norma stood in the centre of the room, biting her lip, her head moving slightly from side to side; she was seeking to formulate her thoughts in conventional terms. Her cheek grew a shade paler.

"Listen," she said at length. "I am anything bad you like to call me. But I 'm not a woman who cajoles men. And I 'm not a liar. I 'm far too cynical to lie. Truth is

much more deadly. I hate lying. That's the main reason why I broke with a man I cared for more than for any other man I have ever met — because he lied. You know whom I mean."

He faced her with a conscious effort. Even at this moment of strain and anger, Norma was struck again with the lurking air of ignobility on his face; but she only remembered it afterwards. He brazened it out.

"Jimmie Padgate, I suppose."

"I can't forgive him for lying."

"I don't see how he lied. He faced the music, at any rate, like a man," said Morland, compelled by a remnant of common decency to defend Jimmie.

"All his pose beforehand was a lie — unless the disclosures afterwards were lies —"

"What do you mean?" asked Morland, sharply.

"Oh, never mind. We have not met to discuss the matter. I don't know why I referred to it."

She paused for a moment. She had begun her tirade at a white heat. Suddenly she had cooled down, and felt lassitude in mind and limbs. An effort brought her to a lame conclusion.

"You accused me of acting a comedy. I was n't acting. I was perfectly sincere. I have been absolutely frank with you from the hour you proposed to me."

"Well, I 'm sorry for having misunderstood you. I beg your pardon," said Morland. They took up the conversation from the starting-point, but listlessly, dispiritedly. The reference to Jimmie had awakened the ever-living remorse in Morland's not entirely callous soul. The man did suffer, at times acutely. And now to act the conscious comedy in the face of Norma's expressed abhorrence was a

difficult and tiring task. Unwittingly he grew gentler; and Norma, her anger spent, weakly yielded to the change of tone.

"We have settled nothing, after all our talk," he said at last, looking at his watch. "Don't you think we had better fix it up now? Society expects us to get married. What will people say? Come — what about Easter?"

Norma passed her hand wearily over her eyes.

"I ought n't to marry you at all. I should loathe it, as I said. I should never get to care for you in that way. You see I am honest. Let us break off the engagement."

"Well, look here," said Morland, not unkindly, "let us compromise. I 'll come back in three days' time. You 'll either say it 's off altogether or we 'll be married at Easter. Will that do?"

"Very well," said Norma.

When Mrs. Hardacre came for news of the interview, Norma told her of the arrangement.

"Which is it going to be?" she asked.

Norma set her teeth. "I can't marry him," she said.

But the proud spirit of Norma Hardacre was broken. The three days' Inferno that Mrs. Hardacre created in the house drove the girl to desperation. Her father came to her one day with the tears running down his puffy cheeks. Unknown to her mother he had borrowed money from Morland, which he had lost on the Stock Exchange. Norma looked in her mirror, and found herself old, ugly, hag-ridden. Anything was preferable to the torture and degradation of her home. The next time that Morland called he stayed to dinner, and the wedding was definitely fixed for Easter.

Chapter XIX

ABANA AND PHARPAR

"DO you know, Miss Hardacre, that I once had a wife?" said Theodore Weever, suddenly.

It was after dinner at the Wolff-Salamons', who, it may be remembered, had lent their house to the Hardacres in the summer.

"I was not aware of it," said Norma, wondering at the irrelevance of the remark, for they had just been discussing the great painter's merciless portrait of their hostess, which simpered vulgarly at them from the wall. They were sitting on a sofa in a corner of the room.

"Yes," said Weever. "She died young. She came from a New England village, and played old-fashioned tunes on the piano, and believed in God."

Not a flicker passed over his smooth waxen face or a gleam of sentiment appeared in his pale steady eyes. Norma glanced round at the little assembly, mainly composed of fleshy company promoters, who, as far as decency allowed, continued among themselves the conversation that had circulated over the wine downstairs, and their womenkind, who adopted the slangy manners of smart society and talked "bridge" to such men as would listen to them. Then she glanced back at Weever.

"I don't want any more wives of that sort," he went on. "I've outgrown them. I have no use for them.

They would wilt like a snow anemone in this kind of atmosphere."

"Is it your favourite atmosphere, then?" Norma asked, by way of saying something.

"More or less. Perhaps I like it not quite so mephitic — You are racking your brains to know why I'm telling you about my wife. I'll explain. In a little churchyard in Connecticut is a coffin, and in that coffin is what a man who is going to ask a woman to marry him ought to give her. I could never give a quiet-eyed New England girl anything again. At my age she would bore me to death. But I could give the woman who is accustomed to hot-houses a perfectly regulated temperature."

Norma looked at the imperturbable face, half touched by his unsuspected humanity, half angered by his assurance.

"Are you by any chance making me a formal demand in marriage?" she asked.

"I am."

"And at last you have found some one who would meet your requirements for the decorative wife?"

"I found her last summer in Scotland," replied Weever, with a little bow. "My countrymen have a habit of finding quickly what they want. They generally get it. I could n't in this particular instance, as you were engaged to another man."

"I am still engaged," said Norma.

"I beg your pardon. I heard the engagement was broken off."

"Not at all. In fact only yesterday was it settled that we should be married at Easter."

"Having gone so far on a false assumption," remarked Weever, placidly, "may I go without rudeness a step

farther? I do not dream of asking you to throw over King — if my heart were not in Connecticut, I might — but I'll say this, if you will allow me, Miss Hardacre: I don't believe you will ever marry Morland King. I have a presentiment that you're going to marry me — chiefly because I've planned it, and my plans mostly come out straight. Anyway you are the only woman in the world I should ever marry, and if at any time there should be a chance for me, a word, a hint, a message through the telephone to buy you a pug dog — or anything — would bring me devotedly to your feet. Don't forget it."

It was impossible to be angry with a bloodless thing that spoke like a machine. It was also unnecessary to use the conventional terms of regretful gratitude in which maidens in their mercy wrap refusals.

"I'll remember it with pleasure, if you like," she said with a half-smile. "But tell me why you don't think I shall marry Mr. King. I don't believe in your presentiments."

She caught his eye, and they remained for some seconds looking hard at each other. She saw that he had his well-defined reasons.

"You can tell me exactly what is in your mind," she said slowly; "you and I seem to understand each other."

"If you understand me, what is the use of compromising speech, my dear lady?"

"You don't believe in Morland?"

"As a statesman I can't say that I do," replied Weever, with the puckering of the faint lines round his eyes that passed for a smile. "That is what astonishes me in your English political life — the little one need talk and the little one need do. In America the politician is the orator.

He must move in an atmosphere of words half a mile thick. Wherever he goes he must scream himself hoarse. But here — "

Norma touched his arm with her fan.

"We were not discussing American and English institutions," she interrupted, "but matters which interest me a little more. You don't believe in Morland as a man? I want to know, as they are supposed to say in your country. I disregard your hint, as you may perceive. I am also indelicate in pressing you to speak unfavourably of the man I 'm engaged to. Of course, having made me an offer, you would regard it as caddish to say anything against him. But supposing I absolve you from anything of the kind by putting you on a peculiar plane of friendship? "

"Then I should say I was honoured above all mortals," replied Weever, inscrutably, "and ask you to tell me as a friend what has become of the artist — the man who got shot — Padgate."

The unexpected allusion was a shock. It brought back a hateful scene. It awoke a multitude of feelings. Its relevance was a startling puzzle. She strove by hardening her eyes not to betray herself.

"I 've quite lost sight of him," she answered in a matter-of-fact tone. "His little adventure was n't a pleasant one."

"I don't believe he had any little adventure at all," said Weever, coolly.

"What do you mean? " Norma started, and the colour came into her face.

"That of all the idiots let loose in a cynical, unimaginative world, Padgate is the greatest I have yet struck. If I

were a hundredth part such an idiot, I should be a better and a happier man. It 's getting late. I 'm afraid I must be moving."

He rose, and Norma rose with him.

"I wish you would n't speak in riddles. Can't you tell me plainly what you mean?"

"No, I can't," he said abruptly. "I have said quite enough. Good-night. And remember," he added, shaking hands with her, "remember what I told you about myself."

Only after he had gone did it flash upon her that she had not put to him the vital question — what had Padgate to do with his disbelief in Morland? As is the way with people pondering over conundrums, the ridiculously simple solution did not occur to her. She spent many days in profitless speculation. Weever prophesied that the marriage would not take place. When pressed for a reason, he brought in the name of Jimmie Padgate. Obviously the latter was to stand between Morland and herself. But in what capacity? As a lover? Had Weever rightly interpreted her insane act on the day of the garden-party, and assumed that she was still in love with the detested creature? The thought made her grow hot and cold from head to foot. Why was he an idiot? Because he did not take advantage of her public confession? or was it because he stood in Weever's eyes as a wronged and heroic man? This in the depths of her heart she had been yearning for months to believe. Connie Deering almost believed it. About the facts once so brutally plain, so vulgarly devoid of mystery, a mysterious cloud had gathered and was thickening with time. Reflection brought assurance that Theodore Weever regarded Jimmie as innocent;

and if ever a man viewed human affairs in the dry, relentless light of reason, it was the inscrutable, bloodless American.

His offer of marriage she put aside from her thoughts. Morland was the irrevocably accepted. It was February. Easter falling early, the wedding would take place in a little over a month. In a cold, dispassionate way, she interested herself in the usual preparations. Peace reigned in Devonshire Place. And yet Norma despised herself, feeling the degradation of the woman who sells her body.

During the session she saw little of Morland. For this she thanked God, the duchess, and the electors of Cosford. The sense of freedom caused her to repent of her contemptuous attitude towards his political aspirations. To encourage and foster them would be to her very great advantage. She adopted this policy, much to the edification of Morland, who felt the strengthening of a common bond of interest. He regularly balloted for seats in the Ladies' Gallery, and condemned her to sit for hours behind the grating and listen to uninspiring debates. He came to her with the gossip of the lobbies. He made plans for their future life together. They would make politics a feature of their house. It would be a rallying-place for the new Tory wing, in which Morland after a dinner at the Carlton Club when his health was proposed in flattering terms, had found himself enlisted. Norma was to bring back the glories of the *salon*.

"When it gets too thick," he said once laughingly, ashamed of these wanderings into the ideal, "we can go off into the country and shoot and have some decent people down and amuse ourselves rationally."

Yet, in spite of absorbing political toys, his complete sub-

jugation of Norma, and the smiling aspect of life, a sense of utter wretchedness weighed upon the soul of this half-developed man. He could not shake it off. It haunted him as he sat stolid and stupefied in his place below the gangway. It dulled all sensation of pleasure when he kissed the lips which Norma, resigned now to everything, surrendered to him at his pleasure. It took the sparkle out of his champagne, the joy out of his life. Now that he had asserted himself as the victorious male who had won the female that he coveted, the sense of wrong inflicted on him grew less and the consciousness of his own shame grew greater. In his shallow way he had loved Jimmie dearly. He also had the well-bred Englishman's conventional sense of honour. Accusing conscience wrote him down an unutterable knave.

One day in March, as he was proceeding citywards to see his solicitors on some question relating to marriage settlements, his carriage was blocked for some minutes in Oxford Street. Looking idly out of the near side window, he saw a familiar figure emerge from a doorway in a narrow passage, come down to the pavement, and stand for a few moments in anxious thought, jostled by the passers-by. He looked thin and ill and worried. The lines by the sides of his drooping moustache had deepened. Jimmie, never spruce in his attire, now seemed outrageously shabby. Certain men who dress well are quick, like women, to notice these things. Morland's keen glance took in the discoloured brown boots and the frayed hem of trousers, the weather stains on the old tweed suit, the greasiness of the red tie, the irregular mark of perspiration on the band of the old Homburg hat. An impulse to spring out of the carriage and greet him was struggling with sheer shame,

when Jimmie suddenly threw up his head — an old trick of his whose familiarity brought a pang to the man watching him — and crossed the road, disappearing among the traffic behind the brougham. Morland gazed meditatively at the little passage. Suddenly he was aware of the three brass balls and the name of Attenborough. In a moment he was on the pavement and, after a hurried word to his coachman, in pursuit of Jimmie. But the traffic had swallowed Jimmie up. It was impossible to track him. Morland returned to his brougham and drove on.

There was only one explanation of what he had seen. Jimmie was reduced to poverty, to pawning his belongings in order to live. The scandal had killed the sale of his pictures. No more ladies would sit to him for their portraits. No more dealers would purchase works on the strength of his name. Jimmie was ill, poor, down at heel, and it was all his, Morland's, fault, his very grievous fault. In a dim, futile way he wished he were a Roman Catholic, so that he could go to a priest, confess, and receive absolution. The idea of confession obsessed him in this chastened mood. By lunch-time he had resolved to tell Norma everything and abide by her verdict. At any rate, if he married her, he would not do so under false pretences. He would feel happier with the load of lies off his mind. At half-past four he left the House of Commons to transact its business without him as best it could, and drove to Devonshire Place. As he neared the door, his courage began to fail. He remembered Norma's passionate outburst against lying, and shrank from the withering words that she might speak. The situation, however, had to be faced.

The maid who opened the front door informed him that Norma was out, but that Mrs. Hardacre was at home. He

was shown upstairs into the empty drawing-room, and while he waited there, a solution of his difficulty occurred to him. He caught at it eagerly, as he had caught at compromises and palliatives all his life. For he was a man of half-sins, half-virtues, half-loves, and half-repentances. His spiritual attitude was that of Naaman.

Mrs. Hardacre greeted him with smiles of welcome, and regrets at Norma's absence. If only he had sent a message, Norma would have given up her unimportant engagement. She would be greatly disappointed. The House took up so much of his time, and Norma prized the brief snatches she could obtain of his company. All of which, though obviously insincere, none the less flattered Morland's vanity.

"Perhaps it is as well that Norma is away," said he, "for I want to have a little talk with you. Can you give me five minutes?"

"Fifty, my dear Morland," replied Mrs. Hardacre, graciously. "Will you have some tea?"

He declined. It was too serious a matter for the accompaniment of clattering teaspoons. Mrs. Hardacre sat in an armchair with her back to the light — the curtains had not yet been drawn — and Morland sat near her, looking at the fire.

"I have something on my mind," he began. "You, as Norma's mother, ought to know. It 's about my friend Jimmie Padgate."

Mrs. Hardacre put out a lean hand.

"I would rather not hear it. I 'm not uncharitable, but I wish none of us had ever set eyes on the man. He came near ruining us all."

"He seems to have ruined himself. He 's ill, poor, in

dreadful low water. I caught a sight of him this morning. The poor old chap was almost in rags."

"It 's very unpleasant for Mr. Padgate, but it fails to strike me as pathetic. He has only got his deserts."

"That 's where the point lies," said Morland. "He does n't deserve it. I do. I am the only person to blame in the whole infernal business."

"You?" cried Mrs. Hardacre, her grey eyes glittering with sudden interest. "What had you to do with it?"

"Well, everything. Jimmie never set eyes on the girl in his life. He took all the blame to shield me. If he had n't done so, there would have been the devil to pay. That 's how it stands."

Mrs. Hardacre gave a little gasp.

"My dear Morland, you amaze me. You positively shock me. Really, don't you think in mentioning the matter to me there is some — indelicacy?"

"You are a woman of the world," said Morland, bluntly, "and you know that men don't lead the lives of monks just because they happen to be unmarried."

"Of course I know it," said Mrs. Hardacre, composing herself to sweetness. "One knows many things of which it is hardly necessary or desirable to talk. Of course I think it shocking and disreputable of you. But it 's all over and done with. If that was on your mind, wipe it off and let us say no more about it."

"I 'm afraid you don't understand," said Morland, rising and leaning against the mantel-piece. "What is done is done. Meanwhile another man is suffering for it, while I go about prospering."

"But surely that is a matter between Mr. Padgate and yourself. How can it possibly concern us?"

As Morland had not looked at the case from that point of view, he silently inspected it with a puzzled brow.

"I can't help feeling a bit of a brute, you know," he said at length. "I meant at first to let him off — to make a clean breast of it — but it was n't feasible. You know how difficult these things are when they get put off. Then, of course, I thought I could make it up to Jimmie in other ways."

"Why, so you can," said Mrs. Hardacre, with the elaborate pretence of a little yawn, as if the subject had ceased to interest her. "You could afford it."

"Money is no good. He won't touch a penny. I have offered."

"Then, my dear Morland, you have done your best. If a man is idiot enough to saddle himself with other people's responsibilities and refuses to be helped when he breaks down under them, you must let him go his own way. Really I have n't got any sympathy for him."

Morland, having warmed himself sufficiently and feeling curiously comforted by Mrs. Hardacre's wise words, sat down again near her and leant forward with his arms on his knees.

"Do you think Norma would take the same view?" he asked. After all, in spite of certain eccentricities inseparable from an unbalanced sex, she had as much fundamental common-sense as her mother. The latter looked at him sharply.

"What has Norma got to do with it?"

"I was wondering whether I ought to tell her," said he.

Mrs. Hardacre started bolt upright in her chair. This time her interest was genuine. Nothing but her long training in a world of petty strife kept the sudden fright out of her eyes and voice. .

"Tell Norma? Whatever for?"

"I thought it would be more decent," said Morland, rather feebly.

"It would be sheer lunacy!" cried the lady, appalled at the certain catastrophe that such a proceeding would cause. Did not the demented creature see that the whole affair was in unstable equilibrium? A touch, let alone a shock like this, would bring it toppling down, never to be set up again by any prayers, remonstrances, ravings, curses, thumbscrews, or racks the ingenuity of an outraged mother could devise.

"It would be utter imbecility," she continued. "My dear man, don't you think one mad Don Quixote in a romance is enough? What on earth would you, Norma, or any one else gain by telling her? She is as happy as possible now, buying her trousseau and making all the wedding arrangements. Why spoil her happiness? I think it exceedingly inconsiderate of you — not to say selfish — I do really."

"Hardly that. It was an idea of doing penance," said Morland.

"If that is all," said Mrs. Hardacre, relaxing into a bantering tone, as she joyfully noted the lack of conviction in his manner, "I 'll make you a hair shirt, and I 'll promise it shall be scratchy — untanned pigskin with the bristles on, if you like. Be as uncomfortable, my dear Morland, as ever you choose — wear a frock-coat with a bowler hat or dine *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Hardacre, but do leave other folks to pass their lives in peace and quiet."

Morland threw himself back and laughed, and Mrs. Hardacre knew she had won what she paradoxically called a moral victory. They discussed the question for a

few moments longer, and then Morland rose to take his leave.

"It 's awfully good of you to look at things in this broad-minded way," he said, with the air of a man whom an indulgent lady has pardoned for a small peccadillo. "Awfully good of you."

"There is no other sane way of looking at them," replied Mrs. Hardacre. "Won't you wait and see Norma?"

"I must get back to the House," replied Morland, consulting his watch. "There may be a division before the dinner-hour."

He smoked a great cigar on his way to Westminster, and enjoyed it thoroughly. Mrs. Hardacre was quite right. He had done his best. If Jimmie was too high and mighty to accept the only compensation possible, he was not to blame. The matter was over and done with. It would be idiotic to tell Norma.

Meanwhile, having made confession and received absolution, he felt spiritually refreshed.

Chapter XX

ALINE PREPARES FOR BATTLE

THE look of illness that Morland had noticed upon Jimmie's face was due to the fact that he had been ill. Italian townlets nestling on hillsides are picturesque, but they are not always healthy. A touch of fever had laid him on his back for a week, and caused the local doctor to order him to England. He had arrived in a limp condition, much to the anxiety of Aline, who had expected to see the roses return to his cheek as soon as their slender baggage had passed the custom-house. He was shabbily dressed because he had fallen on evil times, and had no money to waste on personal vanities. The four guineas which Aline had put aside out of their limited resources to buy him a new suit he had meanly abstracted from the housekeeping drawer, and had devoted, with the surreptitious help of the servant, to purchasing necessary articles of attire for Aline. He was looking worried because he had forgotten in which of the cheap Oxford Street restaurants he had promised to meet that young lady. When he remembered, the cloud passed from his face and he darted across the road behind Morland's brougham. He found Aline seated primly at a little marble table on which were a glass of milk and a lump of amorphous pastry for herself, and a plate of cold beef and a small bottle of Bass for Jimmie. It was too early for the regular crowd

of lunchers — only half-past twelve — and the slim, erect little figure looked oddly alone in the almost empty restaurant.

Jimmie nodded in a general, kindly way at the idle waitresses about the buffet, and marched down the room with a quick step, his eyes beaming. He sat down with some clatter opposite Aline, and took two cheques, a bank-note and a handful of gold and silver from his pocket, and dumped them noisily on the table.

"There, my child. Seven pounds ten. Twenty-five guineas. Five pounds. And eight pounds three-and-sixpence. Exit wolf at the door, howling, with his tail between his legs."

Aline looked at the wealth with knitted brow.

"Can I take this?" she asked, lifting up the five-pound note.

Jimmie pushed the pile towards her. "Take it all, my dear. What on earth should I do with it? Besides, it's all your doing."

"Because I made you go and dun those horrid dealers? And even now Hyam has only given you half. It was fifty guineas — Oh, Jimmie! Do you mean to say you forgot? Now, what did you tell him? Did you produce the agreement?"

Jimmie looked at her ruefully.

"I'm afraid I forgot the wretched agreement. I went in and twirled my moustache fiercely, and said 'Mr. Hyam, I want my money.'"

Aline laughed. "And you took him by the throat. I know. Oh, you foolish person!"

"Well, he asked me if twenty-five would be enough — and it's a lot of money, you know, dear — and I thought if

I did n't say 'yes,' he would n't give me anything. In business affairs one has to be diplomatic."

"I 'll have to take Hyam in hand myself," said Aline, decisively. "Well, he 'll have to pay up some day. Then there 's Blathwayt & Co., — and Tilney — that 's quite right — but where did you get all that gold from, Jimmie?"

"Oh, that was somebody else," he said vaguely. Then turning to the waitress, who had sauntered up to open the bottle of Bass, he pointed at Aline's lunch.

"Do you mind taking away that eccentric pie-thing and bringing the most nutritious dish you have in the establishment?"

"But, Jimmie, this is a Bath bun. It 's delicious," protested Aline.

"My dear child, growing girls cannot be fed like bears on buns. Ah, here," he said to the waitress who showed him the little wooden-handled frame containing the tariff, "bring this young lady some galantine of chicken."

Aline, who in her secret heart loved the "eccentric pie-thing" beyond all other dainties, and trembled at the stupendous charge, possibly ninepence or a shilling, that would be made for the galantine, yielded, after the manner of women, because she knew it would please Jimmie. But accustomed to his diplomatic methods, she felt that a red herring — or a galantine — had been drawn across the track.

"Who was the somebody else?" she asked.

He nodded and drank a draught of beer and wiped the froth from his moustache. Something unusual in his personal appearance suddenly caught her attention. His watch-chain was dangling loose from the buttonhole of his waistcoat.

"Your watch!" she gasped.

Dissimulation being vain, Jimmie confessed.

"You told me this morning, my dear, that if we did n't get fifty pounds to-day we were ruined. You spoke alarmingly of the workhouse. My debt collecting amounted to thirty-eight pounds fifteen. I tried hard to work the obdurate bosom up to eleven pounds five, but he would only give me eight."

"You don't mean to say you have sold your beautiful gold watch for eight pounds?" cried the girl, turning as pale as the milk in front of her.

It had been a present from a wealthy stockbroker who had been delighted with his portrait painted by Jimmie a couple of years ago, and it was thick and heavy and the pride of Aline's existence. It invested Jimmie with an air of solidity, worldly substantiality; and it was the only timekeeper they had ever had in the house which properly executed its functions. Now he had sold it! Was there ever so exasperating a man? He was worse than Moses with his green spectacles. But Jimmie reassured her. He had only pawned the watch at Attenborough's over the way.

"Then give me the ticket, do, or you 'll lose it, Jimmie."

He meekly obeyed. Aline began her galantine with a sigh of relief, and condescended to laugh at Jimmie's account of his exploits. But when the meal was ended, she insisted on redeeming the precious watch, and much happier in knowing it safe in his pocket, she carried him off to a ready-made tailor's, where she ordered him a beautiful thin overcoat for thirty shillings, a neat blue serge suit for three pounds ten, handing over in payment the

five-pound note she had abstracted from his gleanings, and a new hat, for which she paid from a mysterious private store of her own. These matters having been arranged to her satisfaction, she made up for her hectoring ways by nestling against him on top of the homeward-bound omnibus and telling him what a delightful, lovely morning they had spent.

Thus it will be seen that Jimmie, aided by Aline's stout little heart, was battling more than usual against adversity. Aline had many schemes. Why should she not obtain some lucrative employment? Jimmie made a wry face at the phrase and protested vehemently against the suggestion. A hulking varlet like him to let her wear her fingers to the bone by addressing envelopes at twopence a million? He would sooner return to the five-shillings-a-dozen oil paintings; he would go round the streets at dawn and play "ghost" to pavement artists; he would take in washing! The idea of the street-pictures caught his fancy. He expatiated upon its advantages. Five pitches, say at two shillings a pitch, that would be ten shillings a day — three pounds a week. A most business-like plan, to say nothing of the education in art it would be to the public! He had his own fantastical way of dealing with the petty cares of life. As for Aline working, he would not hear of it. Though they lived now from hand to mouth, they were always fed. He had faith in the ravens.

But all the fantasy and the faith could not subdue Aline's passionate rebellion against Jimmie's ostracism. She was very young, very feminine; she had not his wide outlook, his generous sympathies, his disdain of trivial, ignoble things, his independence of soul. The world was arrayed against Jimmie. Society was persecuting him

with monstrous injustice. She hated his oppressors, longed fiercely for an opportunity of vindicating his honour. It was sometimes more than she could bear — to think of his straitened means, the absence of sitters, the lowered prices he obtained, the hours of unremitting toil he spent at his easel and drawing-table. During their travels she had not realised what the scandal would mean to him professionally. Now her heart rose in hot revolt and thirsted for battle in Jimmie's cause.

Her heart had never been hotter than one morning when, the gem of his finished Italian studies having been rejected by the committee of a minor exhibition, she went down to the studio to give vent to her indignation. At breakfast Jimmie had laughed and kissed her and told her not to drop tears into his coffee. He would send the picture to the Academy, where it would be hung on the line and make him famous. He refused to be downhearted and talked buoyantly of other things. But Aline felt that it was only for her sake that he hid his bitter disappointment, and an hour later she could bear the strain of silence no longer.

The door of the studio was open. The girl's footstep was soft, and, not hearing it, he did not turn as she entered. For a few seconds she stood watching him; feeling shy, embarrassed, an intruder upon unexpected sacred things. Jimmie's mind was far away from minor exhibitions. He was sitting on his painting-stool, chin in hand, looking at a picture on the easel. On his face was unutterable pain, in his eyes an agony of longing. Aline caught her breath, frightened at the revelation. The eyes of the painted Norma smiled steadfastly into his. The horrible irony of it smote the girl. Another catch at the breath became a

choking sob. Jimmie started, and as if a magic hand had passed across his features, the pain vanished, and Aline saw the homely face again with its look of wistful kindness. Overwrought, she broke into a passion of weeping. Jimmie put his arms about her and soothed her. What did the rejection of a picture matter? It was part of the game of painting. She must be his own brave little girl and smile at the rubs of fortune. But Aline shook the head buried on his shoulder, and stretched out a hand blindly towards the portrait.

"It 's that. I can't bear it."

An impossible thought shot through him. He drew away from her and caught her wrists somewhat roughly, and tried to look at her; but she bowed her head.

"What do you mean, my child?" he asked curtly, with bent brows.

Women are lightning-witted in their interpretation of such questions. The blood flooded her face, and her tears dried suddenly and she met his glance straight.

"Do you think I'm jealous? Do you suppose I have n't known? I can't bear you to suffer. I can't bear her not to believe in you. I can't bear her not to love you."

Jimmie let go her wrists and stood before her full of grateful tenderness, quite at a loss for words. He looked whimsically at the flushed, defiant little face; he shook her by the shoulder and turned away.

"My valiant tin soldier," he said.

It was an old name for her, dating from nursery days, when they thought and talked according to the gospel of Hans Christian Andersen.

No more passed between them. But thenceforward

Jimmie put the finishing touches to the portrait openly, instead of painting at it when he knew he should be undisturbed. The wedding was drawing near. The date had been announced in the papers, and Jimmie had put a cross against it in his diary. If only Norma would accept the portrait as a wedding-present, he would feel happier. But how to approach her he did not know. In her pure eyes, he was well aware, he must appear the basest of men, and things proceeding from him would bear a taint of the unspeakable. Yet he hungered for her acceptance. It was the most perfect picture he had painted or could ever paint. The divinest part of him had gone to the making of it. It held in its passionate simplicity the man's soul, as the Monna Lisa in its mysterious complexity holds Leonardo's. Of material symbols of things spiritual he could not give her more. But how to give?

Connie Deering settled the question by coming to the studio one morning, a bewildering vision of millinery and smiles and kindness.

"You have persistently refused, you wicked bear, to come and see me since my return to London, so I have no choice but to walk into your den. If it had n't been for Aline, beyond an occasional 'Dear Connie, I am very well. The weather is unusually warm for the time of year. Yours sincerely, J. P.', I should n't know whether you were alive or dead. I hope you 're ashamed of yourself."

This was the little lady's exordium, to which she tactfully gave Jimmie no time to reply. She stayed for an hour. The disastrous topic was avoided. But Jimmie felt that she forbore to judge him for his supposed offence, and learned to his great happiness that Norma had asked after his welfare, and would without doubt deign in her

divine graciousness to accept the portrait. She looked thoughtfully at the picture for some time, and then laid a light touch on his arm.

"How you must love her, Jimmie!" she said in a low voice. "I have n't forgotten."

"I wish you would," he answered gravely. "I ought n't to have said what I did. I don't remember what I did say. I lost my head and raved. Every man has his hour of madness, and that was mine — all through your witchery. And yet somehow it seemed as if I were pouring it all out to her."

Connie Deering perceptibly winced. Plucking up courage, she began:

"I wish a man would —"

"My dear Connie," Jimmie interrupted kindly, "there are hundreds of men in London who are sighing themselves hoarse for you. But you are such a hard-hearted butterfly."

Her lips twitched. "Not so hard-hearted as you think, my good Jimmie," she retorted.

A moment later she was all inconsequence and jest. On parting he took both her white-gloved little hands.

"You can't realise the joy it has been to me to see you, Connie," he said. "It has been like a ray of sunlight through prison bars."

After a private talk with Aline she drove straight to Devonshire Place, and on the way dabbed her eyes with the inconsiderable bit of chiffon called a handkerchief which she carried in her gold chain purse. She saw Norma alone for a moment before lunch, and told her of her visit.

"I don't care what he has done," she declared des-

perately. "I am not going to let it make a difference any longer. He's the same dear creature I have known all my life, and I don't believe he has done anything at all. If there's a sinner in that horrible business, it isn't Jimmie!"

Norma looked out of the window at the bleak March day.

"That is what Theodore Weever said," she answered tonelessly.

"Then why don't you give Jimmie the benefit of the doubt?"

"It is better that I should n't."

"Why, dear?"

"You are a sweet little soul, Connie," said Norma, her eyes still fixed on the grey sky. "But you may do more harm than good. I am better as I am. I have benumbed myself into a decent state of insensibility and I don't want to feel anything ever again as long as I live."

The door opened, and Mrs. Hardacre appeared on the threshold. Connie bent forward and whispered quickly into Norma's ear:

"One would think you were afraid to believe in Jimmie."

She swung round, flushed, femininely excited at having seized the unfair moment for dealing a stab.

"I hope I *have* made her feel," she thought, as she fluttered forward to greet Mrs. Hardacre.

She succeeded perhaps beyond her hope. A sharp glance showed her Norma still staring out of window, but staring now with an odd look of fear and pain. Her kind heart repented.

"Forgive me if I hurt you," she said on their way downstairs to lunch.

"What does it matter?" Norma answered by way of pardon.

But the shrewd thrust mattered exceedingly. After Connie had gone, the wound ached, and Norma found that her boast of having benumbed herself was a vain word. In the night she lay awake, frightened at the reaction that was taking place. Theodore Weever had shaken her more than she had realised. Connie Deering proclaimed the same faith. She felt that she too would have to accept it — against argument, against reason, against fact. She would have to accept it wholly, implicitly; and she dreaded the act of faith. Her marriage with Morland was fixed for that day week, and she was agonisingly aware that she loved another man with all her heart.

The next day she received a hurried note from Connie Deering:

"Do come in for half an hour for tea on Sunday. I have a beautiful wedding-present to show you which I hope you 'll like, as great pains have been spent over it. And I want to have a last little chat with you."

She promised unreflectingly, seeing no snare. But as she walked to Bryanston Square on Sunday afternoon, more of a presentiment, a foreboding of evil, than a suspicion fixed itself upon her mind, and she wished she had not agreed to come. She was shown into the drawing-room, and there, beside a gilt-framed picture over which a cloth was thrown, with her great brown eyes meeting her defiantly, stood Aline.

Chapter XXI

THE MOTH MEETS THE STAR

THUS had Aline, her heart hot for battle in Jimmie's cause, contrived with Connie Deering as subsidiary conspirator. She had lain awake most of the night, thinking of the approaching interview, composing speeches, elaborating arguments, defining her attitude. Her plan of campaign was based on the assumption of immediate hostilities. She had pictured a scornful lady moved to sudden anger at seeing herself trapped, and haughtily refusing to discuss overtures of peace. It was to be war from the first, until she had brought her adversary low; and when the door-handle rattled and the door opened to admit Norma, every nerve in her young body grew tense, and her heart beat like the clapper of a bell.

Norma entered, looked for a moment in smiling surprise at Aline, came quickly forward, and moved by a sudden impulse, a yearning for love, sweetness, freshness, peace — she knew not what — she put her arms round the girl and kissed her.

"My dear Aline, how sweet it is to see you again!"

The poor little girl stood helpless. The bottom was knocked out of her half-childish plan of campaign. There was no scornful lady, no haughty words, no hostilities. She fell to crying. What else could she do?

"There, there! Don't cry, dear," said Norma soothingly, almost as helpless. Seating herself on a low chair

and drawing Aline to her side, she looked up at the piteous face.

"Why should you cry, dear?"

"I did n't know you would be so good to me," answered Aline, wiping her eyes.

"Why should n't I be good to you? What reason could I have for not being glad to see you?"

"I don't know," said the girl, with a touch of bitterness. "Things are so different now."

Norma sighed for answer and thought of her premonition. She was aware that Connie had deliberately planned this interview, but could find no resentment in her heart. The reproach implied in Aline's words she accepted humbly. She was at once too spiritless for anger, and too much excited by the girl's presence for regret at having come. Her eye fell upon the picture leaning against the chair-back, and a conjecture swiftly passed through her mind.

"Mrs. Deering asked me to come and look at a wedding-present," she said with a smile.

"Did she tell you from whom?" asked Aline, thrusting her handkerchief into her pocket. She had found her nerve again.

"No."

"It 's from Jimmie."

"Is it that over there?"

Aline caught and misinterpreted an unsteadiness of voice. She threw herself on her knees by Norma's side.

"You won't refuse it, Miss Hardacre. Oh, say you won't refuse it. Jimmie began it ever so long ago. He put everything into it. It would break his heart if you refused it — the heart of the best and beautifullest and tenderest and most wonderful man God ever made."

Norma touched with her gloved fingers a wisp of hair straying over the girl's forehead.

"How do you know he is all that?"

"How do I know? How do I know the sun shines and the rain falls? It 's just so."

"You have faith, my child," said Norma, oddly.

"It is n't faith. It 's knowledge. You all believe Jimmie has done something horrible. He has n't. I know he has n't. He could n't. He could n't harm a living creature by word or deed. I know he never did it. If I had thought so for one moment, I should have loathed myself so that I would have gone out and killed myself. I know very little about it. I did n't read the newspapers — it 's hideous — it 's horrible — Jimmie would as soon think of torturing a child. It 's not in his nature. He is all love and sweetness and chivalry. If you say he has taken the blame on himself for some great generous purpose — yes. That 's Jimmie. That 's Jimmie all over. It 's cruel — it 's monstrous for any one who knows him to think otherwise."

She had risen from her knees half-way through her passionate speech, and moved about in front of Norma, wringing her hands. She ended in a sob and turned away. Norma lay back in her chair, pale and agitated. The cynical worldling with his piercing vision into men and the pure, ignorant child had arrived at the same conclusion, not after months of thought, but instantly, intuitively. She could make the girl no answer. Aline began again.

"He could n't. You know he could n't. It 's something glorious and beautiful he has done and not anything shameful."

She went on, with little pauses, hurling her short, breath-

less sentences across the space that separated her from Norma, forgetful of everything save the wrong done to Jimmie. At last Norma rose and went to her.

"Hush, dear!" she said. "There are some things I must n't talk about. I dare n't. You are too young to understand. Mr. Padgate has sent me a wedding-present. Tell him how gladly I accept it and how I shall value it. Let me see the picture."

Aline, her slight bosom still heaving with the after-storm of emotion, said nothing, but drew the cloth from the canvas. Norma started back in surprise. She had not anticipated seeing her own portrait.

"Oh, but it is beautiful!" she cried involuntarily.

"Yes — more than beautiful," said Aline, and mechanically she moved the chair into the full light of the window.

Norma looked at the picture for a long time, stepped back and looked at herself in the mirror of the overmantel, and returned to the picture. And as she looked the soul behind the picture spoke to her. The message delivered, she glanced at Aline.

"It is not I, that woman. I wish to God it were." She put her hands up to her face, and took a step or two across the room, and repeated a little wildly, "I wish to God it were!"

"It is very, very like you," said Aline softly, recovering her girl's worship of the other's stately beauty.

Norma caught her by the arm and pointed at the portrait.

"Can't you see the difference?"

But the soul behind the picture had not spoken to Aline. There was love hovering around the pictured woman's lips; happy tenderness and trust and promise mingled in her eyes; in so far as the shadow of a flower-like woman's

passion could strain her features, so were her features strained. Yet she looked out of the canvas a proud, queenly woman, capable of heroisms and lofty sacrifice. She was one who loved deeply and demanded love in return. She was warm of the flesh, infinitely pure of the spirit. The face was the face of Norma, but the soul was that of the dream-woman who had come and sat in the sitter's chair and communed with Jimmie as he painted her. And Norma heard her voice. It was an indictment of her life, a judgment and a sentence.

"I am glad you can't, dear," she said to Aline, regaining her balance. "Tell him I shall prize it above all my wedding-gifts."

They talked quietly for a while about Jimmie's affairs, the pilgrimage through southern France and northern Italy, his illness, his work. His poverty Aline was too proud to mention.

"And you, my dear?" asked Norma, kindly.

"I?"

"What about yourself? You are not looking as happy as you were. My dear child," she said, bending forward earnestly, "do you know that no one has ever come to me with their troubles in all my life—not once. I 'm beginning to feel I should be happier if some one did. You have had yours — I have heard just a little. You see we all have them and we might help each other."

"You have no troubles, Miss Hardacre," said Aline, touched. "You are going to be married in a week's time."

"And you?"

"Never," said Aline. "Never."

Suddenly she poured her disastrous little love-story into Norma's ears. It was a wonderful new comfort to the

child, this tender magic of the womanly sympathy. Oh! she loved him, of course she loved him, and he loved her; that was the piteous part of it. If Miss Hardacre only knew what it was to have the heart-ache! It was dreadful. And there was no hope.

"And is that all?" asked Norma, when she had lowered the curtain on her tragedy. "You are eating out your heart for him and won't see him just because he won't believe in Jimmie? Listen. I feel sure that he will soon believe in Jimmie. He must. And then you 'll be entirely happy."

When the girl's grateful arms suddenly flung themselves about her, Norma was further on the road to happiness than she had ever travelled before. She yielded herself to the moment's exquisite charm. Behind her whirled a tumult of longing, shame, struggling faith, nameless suspicion. Before her loomed a shivering dread. The actual moment was an isle of enchanted peace.

The clock on a table at the far end of the room chiming six brought her back to the workaday world. She must go home. Morland was coming to dinner; also one or two Cosford people, who had already arrived in town in view of the wedding. She would have to dress with some elaborateness. Her heart grew heavy and cold at the prospect of the dreary party. She rose, looked again at the picture in the fading light. Moved by the irresistible, she turned to Aline.

"I should like to see him — to thank him — before — before Wednesday. Do you think he would come?"

Aline blushed guiltily. "Jimmie is in the house now," she said.

"Downstairs?"

"Yes."

For a moment irresolute, she looked vacantly into the girl's pleading eyes. An odd darkness encompassed her and she saw nothing. The announcement was a shock of crisis. Dimly she knew that she trod the brink of folly and peril. But she had been caught unawares, and she longed stupidly, achingly, for the sight of his face. The words of Aline, eager in defence of her beloved, seemed far away.

"Of course he does n't know you are here. He was to call for me at a quarter to six, and I heard the front door open a little while ago. I brought the picture in a cab, and he is under the impression that Mrs. Deering will ask you to — will do what I have done. Jimmie is perfectly innocent, Miss Hardacre. He had not the remotest idea I was to meet you — not the remotest."

Norma recovered herself sufficiently to say with a faint smile:

"So this has been a conspiracy between you and Connie Deering?"

Aline caught consent in the tone, and ignored the question.

"Shall I send him up to you?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes," said Norma.

There was a girl's glad cry, a girl's impulsive kiss, and Norma was left alone in the room. She had yielded. In a few moments he would be with her — the man who had said, "Her voice haunts me like music heard in sleep . . . I worship her like a Madonna . . . I love her as the man of hot blood loves a woman . . . My soul is a footstool for her to rest her feet upon," and other flaming words of unforgettable passion; the man for whom one instant of

her life had been elemental sex; the man whose love had transfigured her on canvas into the wonder among women that she might have been; the man standing in a slough of infamy, whose rising vapours wreathed themselves into a halo about his head. She clenched her hands and set her teeth, wrestling with herself.

"My God! What kind of a fool am I becoming?" she breathed.

Training, the habit of the mask, came to her aid. Jimmie, entering, saw only the royal lady who had looked kindly upon him in the golden September days. She came to meet him frankly, as one meets an old friend. A new vision revealed to her the heart that leapt into his eyes, as they rested upon her. Mistress of herself, she hardened her own, but smiled and spoke softly.

"It is great good fortune you have come, so that I can thank you," she said. "But how can I ever thank you — for that?"

"It is a small gift enough," said Jimmie. "Your acceptance is more than thanks."

"I shall prize it dearly. It is like nothing that can be bought. It is something out of yourself you are giving me."

"If you look at it in that light," said he, "I am happy indeed."

With a common instinct they went up to the portrait and regarded it side by side. Conventional words passed. He enquired after Morland.

"You have n't seen him for a long time?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Not for a long time."

"You must have been very lonely."

"I have had Aline — and Connie Deering — and my work."

"Are they sufficient for you?"

"Any human love a man gets he can make fill his life. It 's like the grain of mustard-seed."

Norma felt a thrill of admiration. Not a tone in his voice betrayed complaint, reproach, or bitterness. Instead, he sounded the note of thanksgiving for the love bestowed upon him, of faith in the perfect ordering of the world. She glanced at him, and felt that she had wronged him. No matter what was the solution of the mystery, she knew him to be a sweet-souled man, wonderfully steadfast.

"Your old way," she replied with a smile, sitting down and motioning him to a chair beside her. "Do you remember that we first met in this very room? You have not changed. Have I?"

"No," he said gravely, "you were always beautiful, without and within. I told you that then, if you remember. Perhaps, now, you are a little truer to yourself."

"Do you think so?" she asked, somewhat bitterly.

"Perhaps it is the approach of your great happiness," blundered Jimmie, in perfect conviction. She was silent. "It has been more to me than I can say," he went on, "to see you once again — as you are, before your marriage. I wish you many blessings — all that love can bring you."

"Do you think love is necessary for married happiness?"

"Without it marriage must be a horror," said Jimmie.

For a moment she was on the brink of harsh laughter. Did he sincerely believe she was in love with Morland? She could have hurled the question at him. Will checked the rising hysteria and turned it into other channels.

"Why have you never married? You must have loved somebody once."

It was a relief to hurt him. The dusk was gathering in the room, and she could scarcely see his face. A Sunday stillness filled the quiet square outside. The hour had its dangers.

"My having loved a woman does not necessarily imply that I could have married her," said Jimmie.

The evasion irritated her mood, awoke a longing to make him speak. She drew her chair nearer, bent forward, so that the brim of her great hat almost brushed his forehead and the fragrance of her overspread him.

"Do you remember a picture you would n't show me in your studio? You called it a mad painter's dream. You said it was the Ideal Woman."

"*You* said so," replied Jimmie.

"I should like to see it."

"It is mine no longer to show you," said Jimmie.

"I think you must have loved that woman very deeply."

She was tempting him as she had tempted no man before, feeling a cruel, senseless joy in it. His voice vibrated.

"Yes. I loved her infinitely."

"What was she like?"

"Like all the splendid flowers of the earth melted into one rose," said Jimmie.

"I wish some one had ever said that about me," she whispered.

"Many must have thought it."

"She must be a happy woman to be loved by you."

"By me? Who am I that I could bring happiness to a woman? I have never told her."

"Why not?" she whispered. "Do you suppose you can love a woman without her knowing it?"

"In what way can the star be cognisant of the moth's desire?" said Jimmie, going back to the refrain of his love.

"You a moth and she a star! You are a man and she is but a trumpery bit of female flesh that on a word would throw herself into your arms."

"No," said Jimmie, hoarsely. "No, you don't know what you are saying."

The temptation to goad him was irresistible.

"We are all of us alike, all of us. Tell her."

"I dare n't."

"Tell me who she is."

She looked at him full, with meaning in her eyes, which glowed like deep moons in the dusk. He brought all his courage into his glance. He was the master. She turned away her head in confusion, reading his love, his strength, his loyalty. A lesser man loving her would have thrown honour to the winds. A curious reverence of him filled her. She felt a small thing beside him. All doubts vanished forever. Her faith in him was as crystal clear as Aline's.

"I have no right to mention her name," he said after a pause.

Norma leaned back in her chair and passed her handkerchief across her lips.

"Would you do anything in the world she asked you?" she murmured.

"I would go through hell for her," said Jimmie.

There was another span of silence, tense and painful. Jimmie broke it by saying:

"Why should you concern yourself about my fantastic affairs? They merely belong to dreamland — to the twilight and the stillness. They have no existence in the living world."

"If I thought so, should I be sitting in the twilight and the stillness listening to you?" she asked. "Or even if I did, may I not enter into dreamland too for a few little minutes before the gates are closed to me forever? Why should you want to shut me out of it? Do you think much love has come my way? Yours are the only lips I have ever heard speak of it."

"Morland loves you," said Jimmie, tremulously.

The door opened. The electric light was switched on, showing two pale, passion-drawn faces, and Connie Deering brought her sweet gaiety into the room.

"If I had known you two were sitting in the dark like this, I should have come up earlier. Is n't it nice, Norma, to have Jimmie back again?"

The spell was broken. Norma gave an anxious look at the clock and fled, after hurried farewells.

The mistress of the house arched her pretty eyebrows as she returned to Jimmie.

"*Eh bien?*"

"Connie —" He cleared his throat. "You have kept my secret?"

"Loyally," she said. "Have you?"

"I have done my best. God knows I have done my best."

He sat down, took up a book and began to turn the leaves idly. Connie knelt down before the fire and put on a fresh log. This done, she came to his side. He took her hand and looked up into her face.

"I have n't thanked you, Connie. I do with all my heart."

She smiled at him with an odd wistfulness.

"You once thanked me in a very pretty manner," she said. "I think I deserve it again."

Chapter XXII

CATASTROPHE

CONNIE DEERING was dining that Sunday evening with some friends at the Carlton, an engagement which had caused her to decline an invitation to the Hardacres'. The prospect, however, for once did not appeal to her pleasure-loving soul. She sighed as she stepped into her brougham, and wished as she drove along that she were sitting at home in the tea-gown and tranquillity harmonious with a subdued frame of mind. Problems worried her. What had passed between Norma and Jimmie? Ordinary delicacy had forbidden her questioning, and Jimmie had admitted her no further into his confidence. In that she was disappointed. When a sentimental woman asks for a kiss, she expects something more. She was also half ashamed of herself for asking him to kiss her. A waspish little voice within proclaimed that it was not so much for Jimmie's sake as for her own; that her life-long fondness for Jimmie had unconsciously slid on to the rails that lead to absurdity. She drew her satin cloak tightly around her as if to suffocate the imp, and returned to her speculation. Something had happened — of that there was no doubt — something serious, agitating. It could be read on both their faces. Had she, who alone knew the hearts of each, done right in bringing them together? What had been her object? Even if a marriage between

them had not been too ludicrous for contemplation, it would not have been fair towards her cousin Morland to encourage this intrigue. She vowed she had been a little fool to meddle with such gunpowdery matters. And yet she had acted in all innocence for Jimmie's sake. It was right for Norma to be friends with him again. It was monstrous he should suffer. If he could not marry the woman he loved, at least he could have the happiness of knowing himself no longer a blackened wretch in her eyes. But then, Norma had taken it into her head to love him too. Had she done right? Her thoughts flew round in a vicious circle of irritatingly small circumference, occasionally flying off on the tangent of the solicited kiss.

The first person she met in the vestibule of the Carlton was Theodore Weever. They exchanged greetings, discovered they belonged to the same party. She had come across him frequently of late in the houses that Norma and herself had as common ground. In a general way she liked him; since Norma had told her of his view of the scandal, he had risen high in her estimation; but to-night he seemed to be a link in the drama that perplexed her, and she shrank from him, as from something uncanny. He sat next her at table. His first words were of Jimmie.

"I was buying pictures yesterday from a friend of yours — Padgate."

In her pleasure Connie forgot her nervousness.

"Why, he never told me."

"He could scarcely have had time unless he telephoned or telegraphed."

"He was at my house this afternoon," she explained.

He carefully peppered his oysters, then turned his imperturbable face towards her.

"So was Miss Hardacre."

"How do you know that?" she cried, startled.

"I was calling in Devonshire Place. Her mother told me. I am not necromantic."

His swift uniting of the two names perturbed her. She swallowed her oysters unreflectingly, thus missing one of her little pleasures in life, for she adored oysters.

"Which pictures did you buy?" she asked.

"The one I coveted was not for sale. It was a portrait of Miss Hardacre. I don't think he meant me to see it, but I came upon him unawares. Have you seen it?"

They discussed the portrait for a while. Connie repeated her former question. Weever replied that he had bought the picture of the faun looking at the vision of things to come, and the rejected Italian study. Connie expressed her gladness. They contained Jimmie's best work.

"Very fine," Weever admitted, "but just failing in finish. Nothing like the portrait."

There was an interval. Connie exchanged remarks with old Colonel Pawley, her right-hand neighbour, who expatiated on the impossibility of consuming Bortsch soup with satisfaction outside Russia. The soup removed, Weever resumed the conversation.

"Have you read your Lamartine thoroughly? I have. I was sentimental once. He says somewhere, *Aimer pour être aimé, c'est de l'homme; mais aimer pour aimer, c'est presque de l'ange.* I remember where it comes from. It was said of Cecco in 'Graziella.' Our friend Padgate reminds me of Cecco. Do you care much about your cousin Morland King, Mrs. Deering?"

Connie, entirely disconcerted by his manner, looked at him beseechingly.

"Why do you ask me that?"

"Because he is one of the *dramatis personæ* in a pretty little comedy on which the curtain is not yet rung down."

She greatly dared. "Are you too in the caste?"

Theodore Weever deliberately helped himself to fish before replying. Then with equal deliberation he stared into her flushed and puzzled face.

"I hope so. A leading part, perhaps, if you are the clever and conscientious woman I take you to be."

"What part has my cousin Morland played?" she asked.

"I must leave you the very simple task of guessing," said Weever; and he took advantage of her consternation to converse with his left-hand neighbour.

"I have painted a peculiarly successful fan, dear Mrs. Deering," said Colonel Pawley, in his purring voice. "A wedding-present for our dear Miss Hardacre. I have never been so much pleased with anything before. I should like you to see it. When may I come and show it you?"

"The wedding is fixed for two o'clock on Wednesday," said Connie, answering like a woman in a dream. The bright room, the crowd of diners, the music, the voice of the old man by her side, all faded from her senses, eclipsed by the ghastly light that dawned upon her. Only one meaning could be attached to Weever's insinuations. A touch on the arm brought her back to her surroundings with a start. It was Colonel Pawley.

"I hope there is nothing—" he began, in a tone of great concern.

"No, nothing. Really nothing. Do forgive me," she interrupted in confusion. "You were telling me something. Oh, I'm dreadfully sorry."

"It was about the fan," said Colonel Pawley, sadly.

"A fan?"

"Yes, for dear Miss Hardacre — a wedding-present."

She listened to a repetition of the previous remarks and to a description of the painting, and this time replied coherently. She would be delighted to see both the fan and himself to-morrow morning. The kind old man launched into a prothalamion. The happy couple were a splendidly matched pair — Norma the perfect type of aristocratic English beauty; Morland a representative specimen of the British gentleman, the safeguard of the empire, a man, a thorough good fellow, incapable of dishonour, a landed proprietor. He had sketched out a little wedding-song which he would like to present with the fan. Might he show that, too, to Mrs. Deering?

It was a dreadful dinner. On each side the distressing topic hemmed her in. In vain she tried to make her old friend talk of travel or gastronomy or the comforts of his club; perverse fate brought him always back to Norma's wedding. She was forced to listen, for to Weever she dared not address a remark. She longed for escape, for solitude wherein to envisage her dismay. No suspicion of Morland's complicity in the scandal had crossed her mind. Even now it seemed preposterous for a man of honour to have so acted towards his dearest and most loyal friend, to say nothing of the unhappy things that had gone before. Suddenly, towards the end of dinner, she revolted. She turned to Weever.

"I don't believe a word of it."

"Of what, dear lady?"

"Of what you have told me about Morland and Jimmie Padgate."

"I have told you nothing — absolutely nothing," he replied in his expressionless way. "Please remember that. I don't go about libelling my acquaintances."

"I shall go and ask Morland straight," she said with spirit.

"*Au succès*," said Weever.

Dinner over, the little party went into the lounge. The screened light fell pleasantly on palms and pretty dresses, and made the place reposeful after the glare of the dining-room, whose red and white and gold still gleamed through the door above the steps. The red-coated band played a seductive, almost digestive air. A circle of comfortable chairs reserved by the host, invited the contented diner to languorous ease and restful gossip. It was the part of a Carlton dinner that Connie usually enjoyed the most. She still took her pleasures whole-heartedly, wherein lay much of her charm. The world, as Jimmie once told her, had not rubbed the dust off her wings. But to-night the sweet after-dinner hour was filled with fears and agitations, and while the party was settling down, she begged release from her host on the score of headache, and made her escape.

She would carry out her threat to Weever. She would see Morland before she slept, and ask him to free her from this intolerable suspicion. She was a loyal, simple woman, for all her inconsequent ways and close experience of the insincerities of life; devoted to her friends, a champion of their causes; loving to believe the best, disturbed beyond due measure at being forced to believe the worst. Jimmie had most of her heart, more of it than she dared confess. But there were places in it both for Norma and for Morland. The latter was her cousin. She had known him all her life. To believe him to have played this sorry part

in what it pleased Theodore Weever to call a pretty comedy was very real pain to the little lady. Her headache was no pretence. No spirit of curiosity or interference drove her to the Hardacres', where she knew she would find Morland; rather a desire to rid herself of a nightmare. Granted the possibility of baseness on Morland's part, all the dark places in the lamentable business became light. That was the maddening part of Weever's solution. And would it apply to the puzzle of the afternoon? Had Norma known? Had Jimmie told her? The pair had been agitated enough for anything to have happened. Theodore Weever, too, had calmly avowed himself an actor in the comedy. What part was he playing? She shivered at the conjecture. He looked like a pale mummy, she thought confusedly, holding in his dull eyes the inscrutable wisdom of the Sphinx. Meanwhile the horses were proceeding at a funereal pace. She pulled the checkstring and bade the coachman drive faster.

The scene that met her eyes when the servant showed her into the Hardacres' drawing-room was unexpected. Instead of the ordinary after-dinner gathering, only Mr. and Mrs. Hardacre and Morland were in the room. The master of the house, very red, very puffy, sat in an armchair before the fire, tugging at his mean little red moustache. Mrs. Hardacre, her face haggard with anxiety, stood apart with Morland, whose heavy features wore an expression of worry, apology, and indignation curiously blended. On a clear space of carpet a couple of yards from the door lay some strings of large pearls. Connie looked from one to the other of the three people who had evidently been interrupted in the midst of an anxious discussion. Here, again, something had happened.

Mrs. Hardacre shook hands with her mechanically. Mr. Hardacre apologised for not rising. That infernal gout again, he explained, pointing to the slashed slipper of a foot resting on a hassock. Norma had made it worse. He had been infernally upset.

"Norma?" Connie turned and looked inquiringly at the other two.

"Oh, an awful scene," said Morland, gloomily. "I wish to heaven you had been here. You might have done something."

"Perhaps you might bring her to her senses now, though I doubt it. I think she has gone crazy," said Mrs. Hardacre.

"But what has occurred?"

"She declares she won't marry me, that's all. There's my wedding-present on the floor. Tore it from her neck as she made her exit. I don't know what's going to happen!"

"Where is she now?"

"Up in her room smashing the rest of her wedding-presents, I suppose," said Mrs. Hardacre.

"Eh, what? Can't do that. All locked up downstairs in the library," came from the chair by the fire.

"Oh, don't make idiotic remarks, Benjamin," snapped his wife, viciously.

The air was electric with irritation. Connie, a peace-maker at heart, forgot her mission in the face of the new development of affairs, and spoke soothingly. Norma could not break off the engagement three days before the wedding. Such things were not done. She would come round. It was merely an attack of nerves. They refused to be comforted.

"God knows what it is," said Morland. "I thought things were perfectly square between us. She was n't cordial before dinner, I 'll admit; but she let me put those beads round her neck. I asked her to wear them all the evening, as there were only the four of us."

"The Spencer-Temples sent an excuse this afternoon," Mrs. Hardacre explained.

"She agreed," Morland continued. "She wore them through dinner. Then everything any one of us said seemed to get on her nerves. I talked about the House. She withered me up with sarcasm. We talked about the wedding. She begged us, for God's sake, to talk of something else. We tried, so as to pacify her. But of course it was hardly possible. I said I had met Lord Monzie yesterday — told me he and his wife were coming on Wednesday. She asked whether Ascherberg and the rest of Monzie's crew of money-lenders, harlots, and fools were coming too. I defended Monzie. He 's a friend of mine and a very decent sort." She shrugged her shoulders. You know her way. Mrs. Hardacre changed the subject. After dinner I saw her alone for a bit in the drawing-room. She asked me to take back the pearls. Said they were throttling her. Had n't we better reconsider the whole matter? There was still time. That was the beginning of it. Mr. and Mrs. Hardacre came up. We did all we knew. Used every argument. People invited. Bishop to perform ceremony. Duchess actually coming. Society expected us. The scandal. Her infernally bad treatment of myself. No good. Whatever we said only made her worse. Ended up with a diatribe against society. She was sick of its lies and its rottenness. She was going to have no more of it. She would breathe fresh pure air.

The Lord knows what she did n't say. All of us came in for it. Said shocking things about her mother. Said I did n't love her, had never loved her. A loveless marriage was horrible. Of course I am in love with her. You all know that. I said so. She would n't listen. Went on with her harangue. We could n't stop her. She would n't marry me for all the bishops and duchesses in the world. At last I lost my temper and said it was my intention to marry her, and marry me she should. Don't you think I was quite right? She lost hers, I suppose, tore off the pearls, made a sort of peroration, declaring she would sooner die than commit the infamy of marrying me — and that 's the end of it."

He threw out his hands in desperation and turned away. His account of events from his point of view was accurate. To him, as to Norma's parents, her final revolt appeared the arbitrary act of unreason. They still smarted resentfully under her lashes, incapable of realising the sins for which they were flagellated.

If she had remained at home that afternoon and continued to practise insensibility, she would probably have followed the line of least resistance during the evening. Or, on the other hand, if she could have been alone, a night's fevered sleeplessness would have caused dull reaction in the morning. The cold contempt for things outside her, which had served for strength, was now gone, leaving a helpless woman to be swayed by passion or led spiritless by convention. The heroic in her needed the double spur. Passion shook her; miserable bondage, claiming her, drove her to rebellion. She rose to sublime heights, undreamed of in her earth-bound philosophy.

She had gone into the street after her interview with Jim-

mie, white, palpitating, torn. Though the man had spoken tremulous words, it was the unspoken, the wave of longing and all unspeakable things in whose heaving bosom they had been caught, that mattered. The Garden of Enchantment had thrown wide its gates; she had been admitted within its infinitely reaching vistas, and flowers of the spirit had bared their hearts before her eyes. Dressing, she strove to kill the memory, to deafen her ears to the haunting music, to clear her brain of the intoxication. A thing hardly a woman, hardly a coherent entity, but half marble, half-consuming fire, stood before Morland, as he clasped the pearl necklace around her throat. The touch of it against her skin caused a shudder. Up to then sensation had blotted out thought. But now the brain worked with startling lucidity. There was yet time to escape from the thraldom. The Idea gathered strength from every word and incident during the meal. The commonness, sordidness, emptiness of the life behind and around and before her were revealed in the unpitying searchlight of an awakened soul.

She pleaded with Morland for release. The necklace choked her. She unclasped it. He refused to take it back. She was his. He loved her. Her conduct was an outrage on his affections. She dared him to an expression of passionate feeling. He failed miserably, and her anger grew. Unhappily he spoke of an outrage upon Society. She fastened on the phrase. His affection and Society! One was worth the other. Society — the Mumbo Jumbo — the grotesque false god to which women were offered up in senseless sacrifice! Her mother instanced the bishop and the duchess as avatars of the divinity. Norma poured scorn on the hierarchy. Mrs. Hardacre implored her daughter by her love for her not to humiliate her thus in

the world's eyes. She struck the falsest of notes. Norma turned on her, superb, dramatic, holding the three in speechless dismay. Love! what love had been given her that she should return? She had grown honest. The gods of that house were no longer her gods. They were paltry and dishonoured, shams and hypocrisies. Once she worshipped them. To that she had been trained from her cradle. Her nurses dangled the shams before her eyes. The women who taught her bent fawning knees before the shrines of the false gods. A mother's love? what had she learned from her mother? To simper and harden her heart. That the envy of other simpering hardened women was the ultimate good. That the dazzling end of a young girl's career was to capture some man of rank and fortune — that when she was married her lofty duty was to wear smarter clothes, give smarter parties, and to inveigle to her house by any base and despicable means smarter people than her friends. What had she learned from her mother? To let men of infamous lives leer at her because they had title or fortune. To pay court to shameless women in the hope of getting to know still more shameless men who might dishonour her with their name. She had never been young — never, never, with a young girl's freshness of heart. She spoke venom and was praised for wit. She was the finished product of a vapid world. Her whole existence had been an intricate elaboration of shams — miserable, empty, despicable futilities. How dared her mother stand before her and talk of love?

Then a quick angry scene, a crisp thud of the pearls on the floor, a stormy exit — and that, as Morland said, was the end of it. The three were left staring at each other in angry bewilderment.

In the face of this disaster Connie could not find it in her heart to reproach Morland, still less to hint at Theodore Weever's insinuation. Rather did she reproach herself for being the cause of the catastrophe, and she was smitten with a sense of guilt when Mrs. Hardacre turned upon her accusingly.

"She had tea with you, did n't she? Did you notice anything wrong?"

"She did n't seem quite herself — was nervous and strange," said Connie, diplomatically. "I think I had better go up and talk to her," she added after an anxious pause.

"Yes, do, for God's sake, Connie," said Morland.

She nodded, smiled the ghost of her bright smile, and, glad of escape, went upstairs. The three sat in gloomy silence, broken only by Mr. Hardacre's maledictions on his gout. It was a bitter hour for them.

In a few moments Connie burst into the room, with a letter in her hand. She looked scared.

"We can't find her. She 's not in the house."

"Not in the house!" shrieked Mrs. Hardacre.

Morland brought his hand down heavily on the piano.

"I heard the front door slam half an hour ago!"

"This is addressed to you, Mrs. Hardacre. It was stuck in her looking-glass."

Mrs. Hardacre opened the note with shaky fingers. It ran:

"I mean what I say. I had better leave you all, at least till after Wednesday. My stopping here would be more than you or I could stand."

Mr. Hardacre staggered with a gasp of pain to his feet, and his weak eyes glared savagely out of his puffy red face.

"Damme, she must come back! If she does n't sleep here to-night, I 'll cut her off. I won't have anything more to do with her. She has got to come back."

"All right. Go and tell her, then," retorted his wife. "Where do you suppose you are going to find her?"

"Oh, she is sure to have gone to my house," said Connie.

"But suppose she has n't," said Morland, anxiously. "She was in such a state that anything is possible."

"Come with me if you like. The brougham is here."

"And you go too, Eliza, and bring her home with you, d' ye hear?" cried Mr. Hardacre. "If you don't, she 'll never set foot in my house again. I 'm damned if she shall!"

His wife looked at him queerly for a moment; then she meekly answered:

"Very well, Benjamin."

Once only during their long married life had she flouted him when he had spoken to her like that. Then in ungovernable fury he had thrown a boot at her head.

Mr. Hardacre glared at Morland and Connie, and scrambled cursing into his chair.

Chapter XXIII

NORMA'S HOUR

SOMETHING had happened — something mysterious, quickening; a pulsation of the inmost harmonies of life. Its tremendous significance Jimmie dared not conjecture. It was to be interpreted by the wisdom of the simplest, yet that interpretation he put aside. It staggered reason. It was enough for them to have met together in an unimagined intimacy of emotion, to have shared the throb of this spiritual happening.

She was to be married in three days. He set the fact as a block to further investigation of the mystery. On this side his loyalty suffered no taint; their relations had but received, in some sense, sanctification. Beyond the barrier lay shame and dishonour. The two were to be married; therefore they loved. He disciplined a disordered mind with a logic of his own invention. It was a logic that entirely begged the question. Remembered words of Norma, "Do you think much love has come my way? Yours are the only lips I have ever heard speak of it," fell outside his premises. They clamoured for explanation. So did the rich tremor of her voice. So did the lamentable lack of conviction in his reply. To these things he closed his intelligence. They belonged to the interpretation that staggered reason, that threatened to turn his fundamental conceptions into chaos. And past incidents came

before him. During those last days in Wiltshire he had seen that her life lacked completion. That memory, too, disturbed his discipline. Fanatically he practised it, proving to himself that ice was hot and that the sun shone at midnight. She was happy in her love for Morland. She was happy in Morland's love for her. She had not identified with herself the imaginary woman of his adoration. She had not drunk in the outpouring of his passion. Her breath had not fallen warm upon his cheek. And the quickening of a wonderful birth had no reference to emotions and cravings quite different, intangible, inexpressible, existent in a far-away spirit land.

He was strangely silent during their homeward journey in the omnibus and the simple evening meal, and Aline, sensitive to his mood, choked down the eager questions that rose to her lips. It was only after supper in the studio, when she lit the spill for Jimmie's pipe — her economical soul deprecating waste in matches — that she ventured to say softly:

"I am afraid you 'll miss the picture, Jimmie dear."

He waited until the pipe was alight, and breathed out a puff of smoke with a sigh.

"Our happiness is made up of the things we miss," he said.

"That 's a paradox, and I don't believe it," said Aline.

"Everything in life is a paradox," he remarked, thinking of his logic. He relapsed into his perplexed silence. Aline settled herself in her usual chair with her workbasket and her eternal sewing. This evening she was recuffing his shirts. Presently she held up a cuff.

"See. I 'm determined to make you smart and fashionable. I don't care what you say. These are square."

"Are n't you putting a round man into a square cuff, my dear?" he asked.

She laughed. "Why should you be round? You are smart and rectangular. When you 're tidied up — don't you know you are exceedingly good-looking, almost military?"

She was delighted to get him back to foolish talk. His preoccupation had disturbed her. Like Connie Deering, she was femininely conscious that something out of the ordinary had passed between Norma and Jimmie, and apprehension as to her dear one's peace of mind had filled her with many imaginings. He returned a smiling answer. She bestirred herself to amuse. Had he remarked the man in the omnibus? His nose cut it into two compartments. What would he do if he had such a nose? Jimmie felt that he had been selfish and fell into the child's humour. He said that he would blow it. They discussed the subject of noses. He quoted Tristram Shandy. Did she remember him reading to her "Slawkenbergius's Tale"?

"The silliest story I ever heard in my life!" cried Aline. "It had neither head nor tail."

"That is the beauty of it," said Jimmie. "It is all nose."

"No. The only story about a nose that is worth anything," Aline declared with conviction of her age and sex, "is 'Cyrano de Bergerac.'" She paused as a thought passed swiftly through her mind. "Do you know, if you had a nose like that, you would remind me of Cyrano?"

"Why, I don't go about blustering and carving my fellow-citizens into mincemeat."

"No. But you —" She began unreflectingly, then she stopped short in confusion. Cyrano, Roxana, Christian;

Jimmie, Norma, Morland — the parallel was of an embarrassing nicety. She lost her head, reddened, saw that Jimmie had filled the gap.

"I don't care," she cried. "You *are* like him. It's splendid, but it's senseless. You are worth a million of the other man, and she knows it as well as I do."

She vindictively stitched at the cuff. Jimmie made no reply, but lay back smoking his pipe. Aline recovered and grew remorseful. She had destroyed with an idiotic word the little atmosphere of gaiety she had succeeded in creating. She pricked her finger several times At last she rose and knelt by his side.

"I'm sorry, Jimmie. Don't be vexed with me."

He looked at her, wrinkling his forehead half humorously, half sadly, and patted her cheek.

"No, dear," he said. "But I think Slawkenbergius's the better tale. Shall I read it you again?"

"Oh, no, Jimmie," cried the girl, half crying, half laughing. "Please don't, for heaven's sake. I've not been as naughty as that!"

She resumed her sewing. They talked of daily things. Theodore Weever's purchases. The faun — he was sorry to lose it after its companionship for all these years. He would paint a replica — but it would not be the same thing. Other times, other feelings. Gradually the conversation grew spasmodic, dwindled. Jimmie brooded over his mystery, and Aline stitched in silence.

The whirr of the front door-bell aroused them. Aline put down her work.

"It's Renshaw," said Jimmie.

Renshaw, a broken-down, out-at-heels, drunken black-and-white artist, once of amazing talent, was almost the

only member of a large Bohemian coterie who continued to regard Jimmie as at home to his friends on Sunday evenings. Jimmie bore with the decayed man, and helped him on his way, and was pained when Aline insisted upon opening the windows after his departure. Renshaw had been a subject of contention between them for years.

"He has only come to drink whisky and borrow money. Luckily we have n't any whisky in the house," said Aline.

"We can give him beer, my child. And if the man is in need of half a crown, God forbid we should deny it him. Has Hannah come home yet?"

"I don't think so. It is n't ten o'clock."

"Then let him in, dear," said Jimmie, finally.

Aline went upstairs with some unwillingness. She disapproved entirely of Renshaw. She devoutly hoped the man was sober. As she opened the front door, the sharp sound of a turning cab met her ears, and the cloaked tall figure of a woman met her astonished eyes.

"Miss Hardacre!"

"Yes, dear. Won't you let me in?"

The girl drew aside quickly, and Norma passed into the hall.

"You?" cried Aline. "I don't understand."

"Never mind. Is Mr. — is Jimmie at home?"

"Jimmie!" The girl's heart leaped at the name. She stared wide-eyed at Norma, whose features she could scarcely discern by the pin-point of gas in the hall-lamp. "Yes. He is in the studio."

"Can I see him? Alone? Do you mind?"

In dumb astonishment Aline took the visitor to the head of the stairs, half lit by the streak of light from

the open studio door. Norma paused, bent forward, and kissed her on the cheek.

"I know my way," she whispered.

Jimmie heard the rustle of skirts that were not Aline's, and springing to his feet, hurried towards the door. But before he could reach it Norma entered and stood before him. Her long dark silk evening cloak was open at the throat, showing glimpses of white bare neck. Its high standing collar set off the stately poise of her head. She wore the diamond star in her hair. To the wondering man who gazed at her she was a vision of radiant beauty. They held each other's eyes for a second or two; and the first dazzling glory in which she seemed to stand having faded, Jimmie read in her face that desperate things had come to pass. He caught her hands as she came swiftly forward.

"Why are you here? My God, why are you here?"

"I could stand it no longer," she said breathlessly. "I am not going to marry Morland. I have cut myself adrift. They all know it. I told them so this evening. The horror of it was unbearable. I have done with it forever and ever."

"The horror of it?" echoed Jimmie.

"Don't you think it a horror for two people to marry who have never even pretended to love each other? You said so this afternoon."

He released her hands and turned aside. Even the deep exulting sense of what her presence there must mean could not mitigate a terrible dismay. The interpretation that staggered reason was the true and only one. He had been living in a dream, among shadow-shapes which he himself had cast upon the wall. Even now he could not grasp completely the extent of his heroical self-deception.

"There has never been any love between you and Morland? It has been a cold-blooded question of a marriage of convenience? I thought so differently."

"Since when?" she asked. "Since this afternoon?"

"No — not since this afternoon."

"If it had n't been for you, I should have married him. You made it impossible. You taught me things. You made me hate myself and my mean ambitions. That was why I hesitated — put it off till Easter. If I had n't seen you this afternoon I should have gone through with it on Wednesday. When I got home I could n't face it. He put some pearls — a wedding-present — round my neck. They seemed like dead fingers choking out my soul. At last it grew horrible. I said things I don't remember now. I could n't stay in the house. It suffocated me. It would have sent me mad. I think a cab whirled me through the streets. I don't know. I have burnt my ships."

She stopped, panting, with her hands on her bosom. His exultation grew, and fear with it. He was like a child trembling before a joy too great to be realised, frightened lest it should vanish. He said without looking at her:

"Why have you come here?"

"Where else should I go? Unless —" She halted on the word.

"Unless what?"

She broke into an impatient cry.

"Oh, can't you speak? Do you want me to say everything? There is no need for you to be silent any longer." She faced him. "Who was the woman — the picture woman we spoke of this afternoon?"

"You," he said. "You. Who else?" There was

a quiver of silence. Then he caught her to him. He spoke foolish words. Their lips met, and passion held them.

"Had I anywhere else to go?" she whispered; and he said, "No."

She released herself, somewhat pale and shaken. Jimmie, scarcely knowing what he did, took off her cloak and threw it on the long deal table. The sudden fresh chill on arms and neck made her realise that they were bare. It was his doing. She blushed. A delicious sense of shyness crept over her. It soon passed. But evanescent though it was, it remained long in her memory.

Jimmie took her in his arms again. He said:

"You madden me. I have loved you so long. I am like a parched soul by a pool of Paradise."

He took her by the hand, led her to his chair near the stove, and knelt by her side. She looked at him, the edges of her white teeth together, her lips parted. She was living the moment that counts for years in a woman's life. She can only live it once. Great joy or endless shame may come afterwards, but this moment shall ever be to her comfort or her despair.

He asked her how she had known.

"You told me so."

"When?"

"At Heddon. Do you think I shall ever forget your words?" She laughed divinely at the puzzledom on his face. "No. You were too loyal to tell me — but you told Connie Deering. Hush! Don't start. Connie did not betray you. She is the staunchest soul breathing. You and she were on the slope by the croquet lawn — do you remember? There was a hedge of clipped yew above —"

"And you overheard?"

She laughed again, happily, at his look of distress.

"I should be rather pleased — now — if I were you," she said in the softer and deeper tones of her voice.

A few moments later he said, "You must give me back the portrait. I shall burn it."

"Why?"

"You are a million times more beautiful, more adorable."

He asked her when she had begun to think of him — the eternal, childlike question. She met his lover's gaze steadily. Frankness was her great virtue.

"It seems now that I have cared for you since the first day. You soon came into my life, but I didn't know how much you represented. Then I heard you speaking to Connie. That mattered a great deal. When that man shot you, I knew that I loved you. I thought you were dead. I rushed down the slope and propped you up against my knees — and I thought I should go mad with agony."

"I never heard of that," said Jimmie in a low voice.

He became suddenly thoughtful, rose to his feet and regarded her with a changed expression, like that of a man awakened from a dream.

"What is going to be the end of this?" he asked.

Norma, for once unperceptive and replying to a small preoccupation of her own, flushed to her hair.

"I know Connie well enough to look her up and ask her for hospitality."

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Jimmie. "We have been like children and had our hour of joy, without thinking of anything else. Now we must be grown-up people. After what has passed between us, I could only ask you to be my wife."

"I came here for you to ask me," she said.

"I have no right to do so, dear. I bear a dishonoured name. The wonder and wild desire of you made me forget."

She looked at him strangely, her lips working in the shadow of her old smile of mockery.

"That proves to me that it is your name and not yourself that is dishonoured. If it had been yourself, you would not have forgotten."

Jimmie drew himself up, and there was a touch of haughtiness in his manner that Norma in her woman's way noted swiftly. In spite of his homeliness there was the undefinable spirit of the great gentleman in Jimmie.

"I am dishonoured. The matter was public property. I discuss it with no one, least of all with you."

"Very well," she said. "Let it never be mentioned again between us. I range myself with Aline. I shall believe what I like. You can't prevent my doing that, can you? I choose to believe you are the one thing God made in which I can find happiness. That 's enough for me, and it ought to be enough for you."

Jimmie put his hand on her shoulder, deeply moved.

"My dearest, you must n't say things like that." He repeated the words, "You must n't say things like that." Then he was conscious of the warm softness on which his hand rested. She raised her arm and touched his fingers. It was a moment of deep temptation. He resisted, drew his hand away gently.

"There is another reason why it cannot be," he said. "You belong to a world of wealth and luxury, I have been in poverty all my life. God forbid I should complain. I have never done so. But it is a life of struggle for daily bread. Aline and I are used to it. We laugh. We often dine with Duke Humphrey. We make believe like the mar-

chioness. What the discipline of life and a sort of gipsy faith in Providence have made us regard as a jest, would be to you a sordid shift, an intolerable ugliness stripping life of its beauty — "

"Oh, hush!" she pleaded.

"No, I must talk and you must listen," he said with a certain masterful dignity. "Look at you now, in the exquisite loveliness of your dress, with that diamond star in your hair, with that queenly presence of yours. Do you fit in with all this? Your place is in great houses, among historic pictures, rare carpets, furniture that is invested with the charm of an artist's touch. The chair you are sitting in — the leather is split and the springs are broken." He was walking now backwards and forwards across the studio, fulfilling his task bravely, scarcely trusting himself to look at her. "Your place," he continued, "is among the great ones of the earth — princes, ambassadors, men of genius. Here are but the little folk: even should they come, as they used to do: homely men with rough ways and their wives — sweet simple women with a baby and a frock a year, God help them! I can't ask you to share this life with me, my dear. I should be a scoundrel if I did. As it is, I have fallen below myself in letting you know that I love you. You must forgive me. A man is, after all, a man, whether he be beggar or prince. You must go back into your world and forget it all. The passion-flower cannot thrive in the hedge with the dog-rose, my dearest. It will pine and fade. We must end it all. Don't you see? You don't know what poverty means. Even decent poverty like ours. Look — the men you know have valets to dress them — when you came Aline was sewing new cuffs on my shirts. I don't suppose

you ever knew that such things were done. Mere existence is a matter of ever anxious detail. I am a careless fellow, I am a selfish brute, like most men, and give over to the women folk around me the thousand harassing considerations of ways and means for every day in every year. But I see more than they think. Aline can tell you. I dare n't, my dear, ask you to share this life with me. I dare n't, I dare n't."

He came to a stop in front of her; saw her leaning over the arm of the chair away from him, her face covered by her hands. Her white shoulders twitched in little convulsive movements.

"Why, my dear — my dear —" he said in a bewilderment of distress; and kneeling by her, he took her wrists and drew them to him. The palms of her hands and her cheeks were wet with miserable tears.

"What must you think of me? What futile, feeble creature must you think me? Heaven knows I 'm degraded enough — but not to that level. Do you suppose I ever thought you a rich man? Oh, you have hurt me — flayed me alive. I did n't deserve it! I would follow you in rags barefoot through the world. What does it matter so long as it is you that I follow?"

What could mortal man do but take the wounded woman of his idolatry into his arms? The single-hearted creature, aghast at the havoc he had wrought, bitterly reproached himself for want of faith in the perfect being. He had committed a horrible crime, plunged daggers, stab after stab, into that radiant bosom. She sobbed in his embrace — a little longer than was strictly necessary. Tears and sobs were a wonder to her, who since early childhood had never known the woman's relief of weeping. It came

upon her first as a wondrous new-found emotion; when his strong arms were about her, as an unutterably sweet solace. And the man's voice in her ears was all that has nearly been said but never been quite said in music.

Presently she drew herself away from him.

"Do you think I am such a fool that I can't sew?"

He sank back on his heels. She rose, helping herself to rise by a hand on his arm, an action wonderfully sweet in its intimacy, and crossed over to Aline's cane-bottomed, armless easy-chair. She plucked the shirt from the basket on the top of which Aline had thrust it, groped among the wilderness of spools, tape, bits of ribbon, scissors, needle-cases, patterns and year-old draper's bills for a thimble, found the needle sticking in the work, and began to sew with a little air of defiance. Jimmie looked on, ravished. He drew nearer.

"God bless my soul," he said. "Do you mean to say you can do that?"

There was nothing she could not do in this hour of exaltation. She had found herself — simple woman with simple man. It was her hour. Her feet trod the roots of life; her head touched the stars.

"Sit in your chair and smoke, and let us see what it will be like," she commanded.

He obeyed. But whether it was tobacco or gunpowder in his old briarwood pipe he could not have told. The poor wretch was mazed with happiness.

"Poor little Aline is all by herself upstairs," said Norma, after a while.

"Heaven forgive me," cried Jimmie, starting up. "I had n't thought about her!"

Chapter XXIV

MRS. HARDACRE FORGETS

WHILE this tragical comedy of the domestic felicities was being enacted, Connie Deering's brougham containing three agitated, silent, human beings was rapidly approaching the scene.

They had made certain of finding Norma at Bryanston Square. The news that she had not arrived disquieted them. Morland anxiously suggested the police. They had a hurried colloquy, Morland and Connie standing on the pavement, Mrs. Hardacre inside the carriage, thrusting her head through the window. Connie falteringly confessed to the meeting of Jimmie and Norma in the afternoon. Something serious had evidently passed between them.

Morland broke into an oath. "By God! That 's where she 's gone. Damn him!"

"We must get her away at all costs," said Mrs. Hardacre, tensely.

"I am afraid it is my fault," said Connie.

"Of course it is," Mrs. Hardacre replied brutally. "The best you can do is to help us to rescue her."

They started. The brougham was small, the air heavy, their quest distasteful, its result doubtful. The sense of fretfulness became acute. Mrs. Hardacre gave vent to her maternal feelings. When she touched on the vile seducer of her daughter's affections, Connie turned upon her almost shrewishly.

"This is my carriage, and I am not going to hear my dearest friend abused in it."

Morland sat silent and worried. When they stopped at the house, he said:

"I think I shall stay outside."

Connie, angry with him for having damned Jimmie, bent forward.

"Are you afraid of facing Jimmie?" she said with a little note of contempt.

"Certainly not," he replied viciously.

A few moments later Aline ran into the studio with a scared face.

"Jimmie!"

He went up to her, and she whispered into his ear; then he turned to Norma.

"Your mother and Connie and Morland are upstairs. I don't suppose you are anxious to see them. May I tell them what has happened?"

Norma rose and joined him in the centre of the studio.

"I would sooner tell them myself. Can they come down here?"

"If you wish it."

He gave the order to Aline. Before going, she took him by the arm and swiftly glancing at Norma, asked eagerly:

"What has happened?"

"The wonder of wonders, dear," said Jimmie.

With a glad cry she ran upstairs and brought down the visitors, who were waiting in the hall.

Jimmie stood by the open door to receive them. Norma retired to the far end of the studio. She held her head high, and felt astonishingly cool and self-possessed. Mrs. Hard-

acre entered first, and without condescending to look at Jimmie marched straight up to her daughter. Then came Connie and Aline, the girl excited, her arm round her friend's waist. Morland, on entering, drew Jimmie aside.

"So you've bested me," he said in an angry whisper. "You held the cards, I know. I did n't think you would use them. I wish you joy."

A sudden flash of pain and indignation lit Jimmie's eyes.

"Good God, man! Have you sunk so low as to accuse me of that? *Me?*"

He turned away. Morland caught him by the sleeve.

"I say —" he began.

But Jimmie shook him off and went to the side of Norma, who was listening to her mother's opening attack. It was shrill and bitter. When she paused, Norma said stonily:

"I am not going home with you to-night, mother. I sleep at Connie's. She will not refuse me a bed."

"Your father means what he says."

"So do I, mother. I can manage pretty well without your protection till I am married. Then I sha'n't need it."

"Pray whom are you going to marry?" asked Mrs. Hardacre, acidly.

"I should think it was obvious," said Norma. "Mr. Padgate has done me the very great honour to ask me to be his wife. I have agreed. I am over age and a free agent, so there's nothing more to be said, mother."

Mrs. Hardacre refused to take the announcement seriously. Her thin lips worked into a smile.

"This is sheer folly, my dear Norma. Over age or not we can't allow you to disgrace yourself and us —"

"We have never had such honour conferred on us in all our lives," said Norma.

Mrs. Hardacre shrugged her shoulders pityingly.

"Among sane folks it would be a disgrace and a scandal. Even Mr. Padgate would scarcely take advantage of a fit of hysterical folly." She turned to Jimmie. "I assure you she is hardly responsible for her actions. You are aware what you would be guilty of in bringing her into this — this —?" She paused for a word and waved her hand around.

"Hovel?" suggested Jimmie, grimly. "Yes. I am aware of it. Miss Hardacre must not consider herself bound by anything she has said to-night."

Connie Deering, who had come up waiting for a chance to speak, her forget-me-not eyes curiously hard and dangerous, broke in quickly:

"Why did you say *even* Mr. Padgate, Mrs. Hardacre?"

"Mr. Padgate has a reputation —" said Mrs. Hardacre, with an expressive gesture.

"Jimmie —"

He checked his advocate. "Please, no more."

"I should think not, indeed! Are you coming, Norma?"

"You had better go," said Jimmie, softly. "Why quarrel with your parents? To-morrow, a week, a month hence you can tell me your wishes. I set you quite free."

Norma made a movement of impatience.

"Don't make me say things I should regret — I am not going to change my mind. No, mother, I am not coming."

Morland had not said a word, but stood in the background, hating himself. Only Connie's taunt had caused him to enter this maddeningly false position. He knew that his accusation, though he believed it true at the time,

was false and base. Jimmie was true gold. He had not betrayed him. Connie, when Jimmie had checked her, went across to Morland.

"Do *you* believe that Jimmie deserves his reputation?" she said for his ears alone.

"I don't know," he answered moodily, kicking at a hassock.

"I do know," she said, "and it 's damnable."

A quick glance exchanged completed her assurance. He saw that she knew, and despised him. For a few moments he lost consciousness of externals in alarmed contemplation of this new thing — a self openly despised by one of his equals. Mrs. Hardacre's voice aroused him. She was saying her final words to Norma.

"I leave you. When you are in the gutter with this person, don't come to ask me for help. You can *encanailler* yourself as much as you like, for all I care. This adventurer — "

Jimmie interposed in his grand manner.

"Pray remember, Mrs. Hardacre, that for the moment you are my guest."

"Your guest!" For the second time that evening she had been rebuked. Her eyes glittered with spite and fury. She lost control. "Your guest! If I went to rescue my daughter from a house of ill fame, should I regard myself as a guest of the keeper? How dare you? How do I know what does n't go on in this house? That girl over there — "

Norma sprang forward and gripped her by the arm.

"Mother!"

She shook herself free. "How do I know? How do you know? The man's name stinks over England. No

decent woman has anything to do with him. Have you forgotten last autumn? That beastly affair? If you choose to succeed the other woman —"

"Oh, damn it!" burst out Morland, suddenly. "This is more than I can stand. Have you forgotten what I told you a week ago?"

The venomous woman was brought to a full stop. She stared helplessly at Morland, drawing quick panting breaths.

She had forgotten that he was in the room.

The cynicism was too gross even for him. There are limits to every man's baseness and cowardice. Moreover, his secret was known. To proclaim it himself was a more heroic escape than to let it be revealed with killing contempt by another. The two forces converged suddenly, and found their resultant in his outburst. It was characteristic of him that there should be two motives, though which one was the stronger it were hard to say — most likely revolt at the cynicism, for he was not a depraved man.

Norma looked swiftly from one to the other.

"What did you tell my mother a week ago?"

Jimmie picked up Morland's crush-hat that lay on the table and thrust it into his hand.

"Oh, that 's enough, my dear good fellow. Don't talk about those horrible things. Mrs. Hardacre would like to be going. You had better see her home. Good-night."

He pushed him, as he spoke, gently towards Mrs. Hardacre, who was already moving towards the door. But Norma came up.

"I insist upon knowing," she said.

"No, no," said Jimmie, in an agitated voice. "Let the dead past bury its dead. Don't rake up old horrors."

Morland cleared himself away from Jimmie.

"My God! You are a good man. I've been an infernal blackguard. Everybody had better know. If Jimmie had n't taken it upon himself, that madman would have shot me. He would have hit the right man. I wish to heaven he had."

Norma grew white.

"And this is what you told my mother?"

"I thought I ought to," said Morland, looking away from the anxious faces around him.

"You should n't have done it," said Jimmie, in a low voice. He was bent like a guilty person.

Norma went to the door and opened it.

"Kindly see my mother into a cab."

"Please take the brougham," said Connie. "Norma and I will take a cab later."

Morland made a movement as if to speak to Jimmie. Norma intercepted him, waved her hand towards her mother, who stood motionless.

"Go. Please go," she said in a constrained voice. "Take the brougham. She will catch cold while you are whistling for a cab — and you will be the sooner gone."

Mrs. Hardacre, stunned by the utter disaster that she had brought about, mechanically obeyed Morland's gesture and passed through the open door, without looking at her daughter. As Morland passed her, he plucked up a little courage.

"We both lied for your sake," he said; which might have been an apology or a tribute. Norma gave no sign that she had heard him.

Jimmie followed them upstairs and opened the front door. He put out his hand to Morland, who took it and said "Good-night" in a shamefaced way. Mrs. Hard-

acre stepped into the brougham like a somnambulist. Morland did not accompany her. He had seen enough of Mrs. Hardacre for the rest of his life.

When Jimmie went down to the studio, he saw Norma and Connie bending over a chair in the far corner. Aline had fainted.

They administered what restoratives were to hand — water and Connie's smelling-salts — and took the girl up to her bedroom, where she was left in charge of Mrs. Deering. Jimmie and Norma returned to the studio. The preoccupation of tending Aline, whose joy in the utter vindication of her splendid faith had been too sudden a strain upon an overwrought nervous system, had been welcomed almost as a relief to the emotional tenseness. They had not spoken of the things that were uppermost.

They sat down in their former places, without exchanging a remark. Jimmie took up his pipe from the table by his side, and knocked the ashes into the ash-tray and blew through it to clear it. Then he began to fill it from his old tobacco-pouch, clumsy as all covered pouches are and rough with faded clumps of moss-roses and forget-me-nots worked by Aline years before.

"Why don't you go on with the sewing?" he said.

She waited a second or two before answering, and when she spoke did not trust herself to look at him.

"I ought to say something, I know," she said in a low voice. "But there are things one can't talk of, only feel."

"We never need talk of them," said Jimmie. "They are over and done with. Old, forgotten, far-off things now."

"Are they? You don't understand. They will always remain. They make up your life. You are too big for

such as me altogether. By rights I should be on my knees before you. Thank God, I did n't wait until I learned all this, but came to you in faith. I feel poor enough to hug that to myself as a virtue."

"I am very glad you believed in me," said Jimmie, laying down the unlit pipe which he had been fondling. "I would n't be human if I did n't — but you must n't exaggerate. Exposure would have ruined Morland's career, and I thought it would go near breaking your heart. To me, an insignificant devil, what did it matter?"

"Did n't my love for you matter? Did n't all that you have suffered matter? Oh, don't minimise what you have done. I am afraid of you. Your thoughts are not my thoughts, and your ways not my ways. You will always be among the stars while I am crawling about the earth."

Jimmie rose hurriedly and fell at her feet, and took both her hands and placed them against his cheeks.

"My dear," he said, moved to his depths. "My dear. My wonderful, worshipped, God-sent dear. You are wrong — utterly wrong. I am only a poor fool of a man, as you will soon find out, whose one merit is to love you. I would sell my body and my soul for you. If I made a little sacrifice for the love of you, what have you done tonight for me — the sacrifice of all the splendour and grace of life?"

"The lies and the rottenness," said Norma, with a shiver. "Did you comprehend my mother?"

He took her hands from his face and kissed her fingers.

"Dear, those are the unhappy, far-off things. Let us forget them. They never happened. Only one thing in the world has ever happened. You have come to me,

Norma," he said softly, speaking her name for the first tremulous time, "Norma!"

Their eyes met, and then their lips. The world stood still for a space. She sighed and looked at him.

"You will have to teach me many things," she said. "You will have to begin at the very beginning."

Chapter XXV

THE LAND OF ENCHANTMENT

EVERY one knew that the marriage arranged between Morland King and Norma Hardacre would not take place. It was announced in the "Times" and "Morning Post" on the Tuesday morning; those bidden to the wedding received hurried messages, and a day or two later the wedding-gifts were returned to the senders, who stored them up for some happier pair. But the new engagement upon which Norma had entered remained a secret. Norma herself did not desire to complete the banquet of gossip she had afforded society, and Mrs. Hardacre was not anxious to fill to overflowing the cup of her own humiliation. The stricken lady maintained a discreet reserve. The lovers had quarrelled, Norma had broken off the match and would not be going out for some time. She even defied the duchess, who commanded an explicit statement of reasons. Her grace retorted severely that she ought to have brought her daughter up better, and signified that this was the second time Norma had behaved with scandalous want of consideration for her august convenience. "She shall not have the opportunity of doing it again. I dislike being mixed up in scandals," said the duchess; and Mrs. Hardacre saw the gates of Wiltshire House and Chiltern Towers closed to her forever. But of the impossible painter wretch she spoke not a word,

hoping desperately that in some mysterious fashion the God of her fathers would avert this crowning disgrace from them and would lead Norma forth again into the paths of decency and virtue. As for her husband, he stormily refused to speak or hear the outcast's name. He had done with her. She should never sleep again beneath the roof she had dishonoured. He would not allow her a penny. He would cut her out of his will. She had dragged him in the mud, and by heaven! she could go to the devil! It took much to rouse the passions of the feeble, mean-faced little man; but once they were roused, he had the snarling tenacity of the fox. Mrs. Hardacre did not tell him of Morland's confession and the rehabilitation of his rival. The memory of her stunning humiliation brought on a feeling akin to physical nausea. She strove to bury it deep down in her sub-consciousness, beneath all the other unhallowed memories. There were none quite so rank. On the other hand, her husband's vilification of the detested creature was a source of consolation which she had no desire to choke. Why should she deny herself this comfort? The supreme joy of vitriol throwing was not countenanced in her social sphere. At odd times she regretted that she was a lady.

While the black fog of depression darkened Devonshire Place, in neighbouring parts of London the days were radiant. A thousand suns glorified the heavens and the breaths of a thousand springs perfumed the air. It was a period of exaggeration, unreality, a page out of a fairy tale lived and relived. Norma abandoned herself to the intoxication, heedless of the fog in Devonshire Place, and the decent grey of the world elsewhere. She refused to think or speculate. Rose veils shrouded the future; the present

was a fantasy of delight. For material things, food, shelter, raiment, she had no concern. Connie fed and housed her, making her the thrice welcome guest, the beloved sister. From society she withdrew altogether. Visitors paid calls, odd people were entertained at meals, the routine of a wealthy woman's establishment proceeded in its ordinary course, and Norma's presence in the house remained unknown and unsuspected. She was there in hiding. The world was given to understand that she was in Cornwall. Even common life had thus its air of romance and mystery. Being as it were a fugitive, she had no engagements. There was a glorious incongruity in the position. She regarded the beginnings of the London season with the amused detachment of a disembodied spirit revisiting the scenes of which it once made a part. Morning, afternoon, and evening she was free — an exhilarating novelty. Nobody wanted to see her save Jimmie; save him she wanted to see nobody.

They met every day — sometimes in the sitting-room on the ground floor which Connie had set apart for her guest's exclusive use, and sometimes in Jimmie's studio. Now and then, when the weather was fine, they walked together in sweet places unfrequented by the fashionable world, Regent's Park and Hampstead Heath, fresh woods and pastures new to Norma, who had heard of the heath vaguely as an undesirable common where the lower orders wore each other's hats and shied at cocoanuts. Its smiling loneliness and April beauty, seen perhaps through the artist's eyes, enchanted her. Jimmie pointed out its undulations; like a bosom, said he, swelling with the first breaths of pure air on its release from London.

Most of all she loved to drive up to St. John's Wood

after dinner and burst upon him unexpectedly. The new Bohemian freedom of it all was a part of the queer delicious life. She laughed in anticipation at his cry of delighted welcome. When she heard it, her eyes grew soft. To lift her veil and hang back her head to receive his kiss on her lips was an ever-new sensation. The intimacy had a bewildering sweetness. To complete it she threw aside gloves and jacket and unpinned her hat, a battered gilt Empire mirror over the long table serving her to guide the necessary touches to her hair. Although she did not repeat the little comedy of the shirt which had been inspired by the exaltation of a rare moment, yet she sat in Aline's chair, now called her own, and knitted at a silk tie she was making for him. She had learned the art from her aunt in Cornwall, and she brought the materials in a little black silk bag slung to her wrist. The housewifely avocation fitted in with the fairy tale. Jimmie smoked and talked, the most responsive and least tiring of companions. His allusive speech, that of the imaginative and cultured man, in itself brought her into a world different from the one she had left. His simplicity, his ignorance of the ways of women, his delight at the little discoveries she allowed him to make, gave it a touch of Arcadia. In passionate moments there was the unfamiliar, poetic, rhapsodic in his utterance which turned the world into a corner of heaven. And so the magic hours passed.

"I do believe I have found a soul," she remarked on one of these evenings, "and that's why I must be so immoderately happy. I'm like a child with a new toy."

She was unconscious of the instinctive, pitiless analysis of herself; and Jimmie, drunk with the wonder of her, did not heed the warning.

Of their future life together they only spoke as happy lovers in the rosy mist shed about them by the veil. They dwelt in the glamour of the fairy tale, where the princess who marries the shepherd lives not only happy ever afterwards, but also delicately dressed and daintily environed, her chief occupation being to tie silk bows round the lambs' necks, and to serve to her husband the whitest of bread and the whitest of cheese with the whitest of hands. Their forecast of the future might have been an Idyll of Theocritus.

"You will be the inspiration of all my pictures, dear," said Jimmie.

"I will sit for you as a model, if I am good enough."

"Good enough!" Language crumbled into meaningless vocables before her infinite perfection. "I have had a little talent. You will give me genius."

"I will also give you your dinner." She laughed adorably. "Do you know Connie told me I must learn to cook. I had my first lesson this morning in her kitchen —a most poetic way of doing sweetbreads. Do you like sweetbreads?"

"Now I come to think of it, I do. Enormously. I wonder why Aline never has them."

"We 'll have some — our first lunch — at home."

"And you will cook them?" cried the enraptured man.

She nodded. "In a most becoming white apron. You 'll see."

"You 'll be like a goddess taking her turn preparing the daily ambrosia for Olympus!" said Jimmie.

On another occasion they spoke of summer holidays. They would take a little cottage in the country. It would have honeysuckle over the porch, and beds of mignonette

under the windows, and an old-fashioned garden full of stocks and hollyhocks and sunflowers. There would be doves and bees. They would go out early and come home with the dew on their feet. They would drink warm milk from the cow. They would go a hay-making. Norma's idea of the pastoral pathetically resembled that of the Petit Trianon.

The magic of the present with its sincerity of passionate worship on the part of the man, and its satisfaction of a soul's hunger on the part of the woman, was in itself enough to blind their eyes to the possible prose of the future. Another interest, one of the sweetest of outside interests that can bind two lovers together, helped to fix their serious thoughts to the immediate hour. Side by side with their romance grew up another, vitally interwoven with it for a spell and now springing clear into independent life. The two children Aline and Tony Merewether had found each other again, and the fresh beauty of their young loves lit the deeper passion of the older pair with the light of spring sunrise. In precious little moments of confidence Aline opened to Norma her heart's dewy happiness, and what Norma in delicate honour could divulge she told to Jimmie, who in his turn had his little tale to bear. More and more was existence like the last page of a fairy book.

The reconciliation of the younger folk had been a very simple matter. It was the doing of Connie Deering. The morning after Morland's confession she summoned Tony Merewether to an interview. He arrived wondering. She asked him point blank:

"Are you still in love with Aline Marden or have you forgotten all about her?"

The young fellow declared his undying affection.

"Are you aware that you have treated her shamefully?" she said severely.

"I am the most miserable dog unhung," exclaimed the youth. He certainly looked miserable, thin, and worried. He gave his view of the position. Connie's heart went out to him.

"Suppose I told you that everything was cleared up and you could go to Aline with a light conscience?"

"I should go crazy with happiness!" he cried, springing to his feet.

"Aline deserves a sane husband. She is one in a thousand."

"She is one in twenty thousand million!"

"There she goes, hand in hand with Jimmie Padgate. It 's to tell you that I 've asked you to come. I hope you 'll let them both know you 're aware of it."

Satisfied that he was worthy of her confidence, she told him briefly what had occurred.

"And now what are you going to do?" she asked, smiling.

"Do? I 'll go on my knees. I 'll grovel at his feet. I 'll ask him to make me a door-mat. I 'll do any mortal thing Aline tells me."

"Well, go now and do your penance and be happy," Connie said, holding out her hand.

"I don't know how I can thank you, Mrs. Deering," he cried. "You are the most gracious woman that ever lived!"

A few moments later an impassioned youth was speeding in a hansom cab to Friary Grove. But Connie, with the memory of his clear-cut, radiant young face haunting her, sighed. Chance decreed that the very moment should

bring her a letter from Jimmie, written that morning, full of his wonder and gratitude. She sighed again, pathetically, foolishly, unreasonably feeling left out in the cold.

"I wonder whether it would do me good to cry," she said, half aloud. But the footman entering with the announcement that the carriage which was to take her to her dressmaker was at the door, settled the question. She had to content herself with sighs.

Tony Merewether did not go on his knees, as Aline had ordained; but he made his apology in so frank and manly a way that Jimmie forgave him at once. Besides, said he, what had he to forgive?

"I feel like Didymus," said Tony.

Jimmie laughed as he clapped him on the shoulder and pushed him out of the studio.

"You had better cultivate the feeling. He became a saint eventually. Aline will help to make you one."

If plain indication of another's infirmities can tend to qualify him for canonisation, Aline certainly justified Jimmie's statement. She did not confer her pardon so readily on the doubting disciple. His offence had been too rank. It was not merely a question of his saying a *credo* and then taking her into his arms. She exacted much penance before she permitted this blissful consummation. He had to woo and protest and humble himself exceedingly. But when she had reduced him to a proper state of penitence, she gave him plenary absolution and yielded to his kiss, as she had been yearning to do since the beginning of the interview. After that she settled down to her infinite delight. Nothing was lacking in the new rapturous scheme of existence. The glory of Jimmie was vindicated. Tony had come back to her. The bars to their marriage had

vanished. Not only was Tony a man of substance with the legacy of eight thousand pounds that had been left him, and therefore able to support as many wives as the Grand Turk, but Jimmie no longer had to be provided for. The wonder of wonders had happened; she could surrender her precious charge with a free conscience and a heart bursting with gratitude.

Thus the happiness of each pair of lovers caught a reflection from that of the other, and its colour was rendered ever so little fictitious, unreal. The light of spring sunrise, exquisite though it is, invests things with a glamour which the light of noon dispels. The spectacle of the young romance unfolding itself before the eyes of Jimmie and Norma completed their delicious sense of the idyllic; but the illusive atmosphere thus created caused them to view their own romance in slightly false perspective. Essentially it was a drama of conflict — themselves against the pettinesses and uglinesses of the world; apparently it was a pastoral among spring flowers.

Another cause that contributed to Norma's unconcern for the future was her exaggerated sense of the man's loftiness of soul. Instead of viewing him as a lovable creature capable of the chivalrous and the heroic and afforded by a happy fate an opportunity of displaying these qualities — for the opportunity makes the hero as much as it does the thief — she grovelled whole-sexedly before an impossible idol imbued with impossible divinity. While knitting silk ties and devising with him the preparation of foodstuffs (which she did not realise he would not be able to afford) she was conscious of a grace in the trifling, all the more precious because of these little earthly things midway between the empyrean and the abyss which they

respectively inhabited. In the deeply human love of each was a touch of the fantastic. To Jimmie she was the Princess of Wonderland, the rare Lady of Dreams; to Norma he appeared little less than a god.

She was talking one evening with Connie Deering in a somewhat exalted strain of her own unworthiness and Jimmie's condescension, when the little lady broke into an unwonted expression of impatience.

"My dear child, every foolish woman is a valet to her hero. You would like to clean his boots, would n't you?"

"My dear Connie," cried Norma, alarmed, "whatever is the matter?"

"I think you two had better get married as quickly as possible. It is getting on one's nerves."

Norma stiffened. "I am sorry —" she began.

Connie interrupted her. "Don't be silly. There's nothing for you to be sorry about." She brightened and laughed, realising the construction Norma had put upon her words. "I am only advising you for your good. I had half an hour's solitary imprisonment with Theodore Weever this afternoon. He always takes it out of me. It's like having a bath with an electric eel. He called this afternoon to get news of you."

"Of me?" asked Norma serenely, settling herself in the depths of her chair.

"He *is* like an eel," Connie exclaimed with a shiver. "He's the coldest-blooded thing I've ever come across. I told you about the dinner at the Carlton, did n't I? It appears that he reckoned on my doing just what I rushed off to do. It makes me so angry!" she cried with feminine emphasis on the last word. "Of course he did n't tell me so brutally — he has a horrid snake-like method of

insinuation. He had counted on my getting at the truth which he had guessed and so stopping the marriage. 'I 'm a true prophet,' he said. 'I knew that marriage would never come off.' "

"So he told me," said Norma. "Do you know, there must be some goodness in him to have perceived the goodness in Jimmie."

"I believe he 's a disembodied spirit without either goodness or badness — a sort of non-moral monster." Connie was given to hyperbole in her likes and dislikes. She continued her tale. He had come to ask her advice. Now that Miss Hardacre was free, did Mrs. Deering think he might press his suit with advantage? His stay in Europe was drawing to a close. He would like to take back with him to New York either Miss Hardacre or a definite refusal.

"'You certainly cannot take back Miss Hardacre,' I said, 'because she is going to marry Jimmie Padgate.' I thought this would annihilate him. But do you think he moved a muscle? Not he."

"What did he say?" asked Norma, lazily amused.

"'This is getting somewhat monotonous,'" replied Connie.

Norma laughed. "Nothing else?"

"He began to talk about theatres. He has the most disconcerting way of changing the conversation. But on leaving he sent his congratulations to you, and said that you were always to remember that you were the wife specially designed for him by Providence."

"You dear thing," said Norma, "and did that get on your nerves?"

"Would n't it get on yours?"

Norma shook her head. "I have n't any nerves for things to get on. People don't have nerves when they 're happy."

"And are you happy, really, really happy?"

"I am deliciously happy," said Norma.

She went to bed laughing at the discomfiture of Weever and the remoteness of him and of the days last summer when she first met him among the Monzies' disreputable crowd. He belonged to a former state of existence. Jimmie's portrait, which had been put for two or three reasons in her bedroom, caught her attention. She looked at it with a dreamy smile for a long time, and then turned to the glass. Made curiously happy by what she saw there, she kissed her fingers to the portrait.

"He is the better prophet," she said.

But Connie's advice as to the desirability of a speedy marriage remained in her mind. Jimmie with characteristic diffidence had not yet suggested definite arrangements. She was gifted with so much insight as to apprehend the reasons for his lack of initiative. His very worship of her, his overwhelming sense of goddess-conferred boon in her every smile and condescension, precluded the asking of favours. So far it was she who had arranged their daily life. It was she who had established the custom of the studio visits, and she had taken off her hat and had inaugurated the comedy of the domestic felicities of her own accord. She treasured this worship in her heart as a priceless thing, all the more exquisite because it lay by the side of the knowledge of her own unworthiness. The sacrifice of maidenly modesty in proposing instead of coyly yielding was at once a delicious penance for hypocritical assumption of superiority, and a salve to her pride as a beautiful and

desirable woman. It was with a glorious sureness of relation, therefore, that she asked him the next day if he had thought of a date for their marriage.

"There is no reason for a long engagement that I can see," she added, with a blush which she felt, and was tremulously happy at feeling.

"I was waiting for you to say, dear," he replied, his arm around her. "I dared not ask."

She laughed the deep laugh of a woman's happiness.

"I knew you would say that," she murmured. "Let it be some time next month."

Chapter XXVI

EARTH AGAIN

ONE day Norma received a polite intimation from her bankers that her account was overdrawn. This had happened before; but on previous occasions she had obtained from her father an advance on her allowance and the unpleasant void at the bank had been filled. Now she realised with dismay that the allowance had been cut off, and that no money could come into her possession until the payment of the half-yearly dividend from the concern in which her small private fortune was invested. She looked in her purse and found five shillings. On this she would have to live for three weeks. Her money was in the hands of trustees, wisely tied up by the worldly aunt from whom she had inherited it, so that she could not touch the capital. While she was contemplating the absurdity of the position, the maid brought up a parcel from a draper's on which there was three and eleven pence halfpenny to pay. She surrendered four of her shillings, and disconsolately regarded the miserable one that remained. The position had grown even more preposterous. She actually needed money. She had not even the amount of a cab-fare to Friary Grove. She would not have it for three weeks.

Preposterous or not, the fact was plain, and demanded serious consideration. She would have to borrow. The

repayment of the loan and the overdraft would reduce the half-yearly dividend. A goodly part of the remainder would be required to meet an outstanding milliners' bill, not included in the bridal trousseau for which her father was to pay. The sum in simple arithmetic frightened her.

"I am poverty-stricken," she said to Connie, to whom she confided her difficulties.

Connie blotted the cheque that was to provide for immediate wants, and laughed sympathetically.

"You'll have to learn to be economical, dear. I believe it's quite easy."

"You mean I must go in omnibuses and things?" said Norma, vaguely.

"And not order so many hats and gowns."

"I see," said Norma, folding up the cheque.

With money again in her pocket, she felt lighter of heart, but she knew that she had stepped for a moment out of fairyland into the grey world of reality. The first experience was unpleasant. It left a haunting dread which made her cling closer to Jimmie in the embrace of their next meeting. It was a relief to get back into the Garden of Enchantment and leave sordid things outside. Wilfully she kept the conversation from serious discussion of their marriage.

When next she had occasion to go to the studio, she remembered the necessity of economy, and took the St. John's Wood omnibus. As a general rule the travellers between Baker Street station and the Swiss Cottage are of a superior class, being mostly the well-to-do residents in the neighbourhood and their visitors; but, by an unlucky chance, this particular omnibus was crowded, and Norma found herself wedged between a labouring man redolent of stale beer

and bad tobacco, and a fat Jewish lady highly flavoured with musk. A youth getting out awkwardly knocked her hat awry with his elbow. It began to rain — a smart April shower. The wet umbrella of a new arrival dripped on her dress while he stood waiting for a place to be made for him opposite. The omnibus stopped at a shelterless corner, the nearest point to Friary Grove. She descended to pitiless rain and streaming pavements and a five minutes' walk, for all of which her umbrella and shoes were inadequate. She vowed miserably a life-long detestation of omnibuses. She would never enter one again. Cabs were the only possible conveyances for people who could not afford to keep their carriage. She fought down the dread that she might not be able to afford cabs. The Almighty, who had obviously intended her to drive in cabs, would certainly see that His intentions were carried out.

She arrived at the studio, wet, bedraggled, and angry; but Jimmie's exaggerated concern disarmed her. It could not have been less had she wandered for miles and been drenched to the skin and chilled to the bone. He sent Aline to fetch her daintiest slippers to replace the damp shoes, established the storm-driven sufferer in the big leathern armchair with cushions at her back and hassocks at her feet, made a roaring fire and insisted on her swallowing cherry brandy, a bottle of which he kept in the house in case of illness. In the unwonted luxury of being loved and petted and foolishly fussed over, Norma again forgot her troubles. Jimmie consoled the specific grievance by saying magniloquently that omnibuses were the engines of the devil and vehicles of the wrath to come. With a drugged economic conscience she went home in a cab. But the conscience awoke later, somewhat suffering, and

she recognised that her exasperated vow had been vain. Jimmie was a poor man. She recalled to mind his words on the night of their engagement, and apprehended their significance. The trivial incident of the omnibus was a key. The abandonment of cabs and carriages meant the surrender of countless luxuries that went therewith. Her own two hundred a year would not greatly raise the scale of living. She was to be a poor man's wife; would have to wear cheap dresses, eat plain food, keep household books in which pennies were accounted for; hers would be the humdrum existence of the less prosperous middle class. The first pang of doubt frightened her for a while and left her ashamed. Noble revolt followed. Had she not renounced the pomps and vanities of a world which she scorned? Had not this wonderful baptism of love brought New Birth? She had been reborn, a braver, purer woman; she had been initiated into life's deeper mysteries; her soul had been filled with joy. Of what count were externals?

The next evening Connie Deering gave a small dinner-party in honour of the two engagements. Old Colonel Pawley, charged under pain of her perpetual displeasure not to reveal the secret of Norma's whereabouts, was invited to balance the sexes. He was delighted to hear of Norma's romantic marriage.

"I can still present the fan," he said, rubbing his soft palms together; "but I'm afraid I shall have to write a fresh set of verses."

"You had better give Norma a cookery-book," laughed Connie.

"I have a beautiful one of my own in manuscript which no publisher will take up," sighed Colonel Pawley.

Norma, who had been wont to speak with drastic con-

tempt of the amiable old warrior, welcomed him so cordially that he was confused. He was not accustomed to exuberant demonstrations of friendship from the beautiful Miss Hardacre. At dinner, sitting next her, he enjoyed himself enormously. Instead of freezing his geniality with sarcastic remarks, she lured him on to the gossip in which his heart delighted. When Connie rallied her, later, on her flirtation with the old man, she laughed.

"Remember I 've been a prisoner here. He 's one of the familiar faces from outside."

Although jestingly, she had spoken with her usual frankness, and her confession was more deeply significant than she was aware at the time. She had welcomed Colonel Pawley not for what he was, but for what he represented. As soon as she was alone she realised the moral lapse, and rebuked herself severely. She was sentimental enough to hang by a ribbon around her neck the simple engagement ring which Jimmie had given her, and to sleep with it as a talisman against evil thoughts.

She spent the following evening at the studio, heroically enduring the discomforts of the detested omnibus. When she descended she drew a breath of relief, but felt the glow that comes from virtuous achievement. Jimmie was informed of this practice in the art of economy. He regarded her wistfully. There were times when he too fought with doubts, — not of her loyalty, but of his own honesty in bringing her down into his humble sphere. Even now, accustomed as he was to the adored sight of her there, he could not but note the contrast between herself and her surroundings. She brought with her in every detail of her person, in every detail of her dress, in every detail of her manner, an atmosphere of a dainty, luxurious life

pathetically incongruous with the shabby little house. He had not even the wherewithal to call in decorators and upholsterers and make the little house less shabby. So when she spoke of practising economy, he looked at her wistfully.

"Your eyes are open, dear, aren't they?" he said. "You really do realise what a sacrifice you are making in marrying me?"

"By not marrying you," she replied, "I should have gained the world and lost my own soul. Now I am doing the reverse."

He kissed her finger-tips lover-wise. "I am afraid I must be the devil's advocate, and say that the loss and gain need not be so absolutely differentiated. I want you to be happy. My God! I want you to be happy," he burst out with sudden passion, "and if you found that things were infinitely worse than what you had expected, that you had married me in awful ignorance —"

She covered his lips with the palm of her hand.

"Don't go on. You pain me. You make me despise myself. I have counted the cost, such as it is. Did I not tell you from the first that I would go with you in rags and barefoot through the world? Could woman say more? Don't you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you," he replied, bowing his head. "You are a great-hearted woman."

She unfastened her hat, skewered it through with the pins, and gave it him to put down.

"I remember my Solomon," she said, trying to laugh lightly, for there had been a faint but disconcerting sense of effort in her protestation. "'Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred there-

with." Besides, you forget another important matter. I am now a homeless, penniless outcast. I am not sacrificing anything. It is very kind of you to offer to take me in and shelter me."

"These are sophistries," said Jimmie, with a laugh. "You gave up all on my account."

"But I am really penniless," she said, ignoring his argument. "*Anch' io son pittore.* I too have felt the pinch of poverty."

"You?"

She revealed her financial position — the overdraft at the bank, the shilling between herself and starvation. Were it not for Connie, she would have to sing in the streets. She alluded thoughtlessly, with her class's notions as to the value of money, to her "miserable two hundred a year."

"Two hundred a year!" cried Jimmie. "Why, that's a fortune!"

His tone struck a sudden chill through her. He genuinely regarded the paltry sum as untold riches. She struggled desperately down to his point of view.

"Perhaps it may come in useful for us," she said lamely.

"I should think it will! Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Have you never thought I might have a little of my own?" she asked with a touch of her old hardness.

"No," said Jimmie. "Of course not."

"I don't see any 'of course' in the matter. The ordinary man would have speculated — it would have been natural — almost common-sense."

Jimmie threw up his hands deprecatingly.

"I have been too much dazzled by the glorious gift of yourself to think of anything else you might bring. I am

an impossible creature, as you will find out. I ought to have considered the practical side."

"Oh! I am very glad you did n't!" she exclaimed. "Heaven forbid you should have the mercenary ideas of the average man. It is beautiful to have thought of me only."

"I am afraid I was thinking of myself, my dear," said he. "I must get out of the way of it, and think of the two of us. Now let us be severely business-like. You have taken a load off my mind. There are a thousand things you can surround yourself with that I imagined you would lack." He took her two hands and swung them backwards and forwards. "Now I shan't regard myself as such a criminal in asking you to marry me."

"Do you think two hundred a year a fortune, Jimmie?" she asked.

"To the Rothschilds and Vanderbilts perhaps not — but everything is relative."

"Everything?"

Her heart spoke suddenly, demanding relief. Their eyes met.

"No, dear," he said. "One thing at least is absolute."

An interlude of conviction succeeded doubt. She felt that she had never loved him so much as at that moment. It was more with the quickly lit passion of the awakened woman than with the ardour of a girl that she clasped her hands round his head and drew it down to their kiss. She had an awful need of the assurance of the absolute.

It nerved her to face a discussion on ways and means with Aline, whom Jimmie at her request summoned from demure sewing in her little drawing-room.

"You are right," she had said, referring to his former

remark. "We ought to be severely business-like. I must begin to learn things. You don't know how hopelessly ignorant I am."

Aline came down to give the first lesson in elementary housekeeping. She brought with her a pile of little black books which she spread out at the end of the long table. The two girls sat side by side. Jimmie hovered about them for a while, but was soon dismissed by Aline to a distant part of the studio, where, having nothing wherewith to occupy himself, he proceeded to make a charcoal sketch of the two intent faces.

Aline, proud at being able to display her housewifely knowledge before appreciative eyes, opened her books, and expounded them with a charming business air. These were the receipts for the last twelve months; these the general disbursements. They were balanced to a half-penny.

"Of course anything I can't account for, I put down to the item 'Jimmie,'" she said naïvely. "He *will* go to the money-drawer and help himself without letting me know. Isn't it tiresome of him?"

Norma smiled absently, wrinkling her brows over the unfamiliar figures. She had no grasp of the relation the amounts of the various items bore to one another, but they all seemed exceedingly small.

"I suppose it's necessary to make up this annual balance?" she asked.

"Of course. Otherwise you wouldn't know how much you could apportion to each item. Jimmie says it's nonsense to keep books; but if you listen to Jimmie, you'll have the brokers in in a month."

"Brokers?"

Aline laughed at her perplexed look. "Yes, to seize the furniture in payment of debt."

The main financial facts having been stated, Aline came to detail. These were the weekly books from the various tradesmen. She showed a typical week's expenditure.

"What about the fishmonger?" asked Norma, noting an obvious omission.

"Fish is too expensive to have regularly," Aline explained, "and so I don't have an account. When I buy any, I pay for it at once, in the shop."

"When *you* buy it?"

"Why, yes. You 'll find it much better to go and choose things for yourself than let them call for orders. Then you can get exactly what you want, instead of what suits the tradesman's convenience. You see, I go to the butcher and look round, and say 'I want a piece of that joint,' and of course he does as he 's told. It seems horrid to any one not accustomed to it to go into a butcher's shop, I know; but really it 's not unpleasant, and it 's quite amusing."

"But why should n't your housekeeper do the marketing?"

"Oh, she does sometimes," Aline admitted; "but Hannah is n't a good buyer. She can't *judge* meat and things, you know, and she is apt to be wasteful over vegetables."

"You don't bring the — the meat and things — home with you in a basket, do you?" asked Norma, with a nervous laugh.

Jimmie, interested in his sketch, had not listened to the conversation, which had been carried on in a low tone. The last words, however, pitched higher, caught his ear. He jumped to his feet.

"Norma carry home meat in a basket! Good God! What on earth has the child been telling you?"

"I never said anything of the kind, Jimmie," cried Aline, indignantly. "You need n't bring home anything unless you like; our tradesmen are most obliging."

Norma pushed back her chair from the table and rose and again laughed nervously.

"I am afraid I can't learn all the science of domestic economy in one lesson. I must do it by degrees." She passed her hand across her forehead. "I 'm not used to figures, you see."

Jimmie looked reproachfully at Aline. "Those horrid little black books!" he exclaimed. "They are enough to give any one a headache. For heaven's sake, have nothing to do with them, dear."

"But the brokers will come in," said Norma, with an uncertain catch in her voice.

"They are Aline's pet hobgoblins," laughed Jimmie. "My dear child," pointing to the books, "please take those depressing records of wasted hours away."

When they were alone, he said to Norma very tenderly, "I am afraid my little girl has frightened you."

She started at the keenness of his perception and flushed.

"No — not frightened."

"She is so proud of the way she runs her little kingdom here," he said; "so proud to show you how it is done. You must forgive her. She is only a child, my dearest, and forgets that these household delights of hers may come as shocks to you. I shall not allow you to have these worries that she loves to concern her head about."

"Then who will have them?" she asked, with her hand

on the lappel of his jacket. "You? That would be absurd. If I am your wife, I must keep your house."

"My dear," said Jimmie, kissing her, "if we love each other, there will be no possibility of worries. I believe in God in a sort of way, and He has not given you to me to curse and wither your life."

"You could only bless and sanctify it," she murmured.

"Not I, dear; but our love."

Soothed, she raised a smiling face.

"But still, I 'll have to keep house. Do you think I would let you go to the butcher's? What would Aline say if you made such a proposal?"

"She would peremptorily forbid him to take my orders," he replied, laughing.

"I am sure I should," she said.

It was growing late. She glanced at the wheezy tilted old Dutch clock in the corner, and spoke of departure. She reflected for a moment on the means of home-getting. To her lowered spirits the omnibus loomed like a lumbering torture-chamber. The consolation of a cab seemed cowardice. An inspiration occurred to her. She would walk; perhaps he would accompany her to Bryanston Square. He was enraptured at the suggestion. But could she manage the distance?

"I should like to try. I am a good walker — and when we are outside," she added softly, "we can talk a little of other matters."

It was a mild spring night, and the quiet stars shone benignantly upon them as they walked arm in arm, and talked of "other matters." As she had needed a little while before the assurance of the absolute, so now she craved the spirituality of the man himself, the inner light of faith in

the world's beauty, the sweetness, the courage — all that indefinable something in him which raised him, and could alone raise her, above the terrifying things of earth. She clung to his arm in a pathos of yearning for him to lead her upward and teach her the things of the spirit. Only thus lay her salvation.

He, clean, simple soul, lost in the splendour of their love, expounding, as it chanced, his guileless philosophy of life and his somewhat childishly pagan religious convictions, was far from suspecting the battle into which he was being called to champion the side of righteousness. He went to sleep that night the most blissfully happy of men. Norma lay awake, a miserable woman.

Chapter XXVII

A DINNER OF HERBS

SHE loved him. Of that there was no doubt. To her he was the man of men. The half angel, half fool of her original conception had melted into an heroic figure capable of infinite tendernesses. The lingering barbaric woman in her thrilled at the memory of him contemptuously facing death before the madman's revolver. Her higher nature was awed at the perfect heroism of his sacrifice. She knelt at his feet, recognising the loftier soul. Sex was stirred to the depths when his arms were about her and his kiss was on her lips. In lighter relations he was the perfect companion. For all her vacillation, let that be remembered: she loved him. All of her that was worth the giving he had in its plenitude.

The days which followed her initiation into domestic economy were days of alternating fear and shame and scornful resolution. She lost grip of herself. The proud beauty curving a contumelious lip at the puppet show of life was a creature of the past. Set the proudest and most self-sufficing of women naked in what assembly you please, and she will crouch, helpless, paralysed, in the furthest corner. Some such denudation of the moral woman had occurred in the case of Norma Hardacre. The old garments were stripped from her. She was bewildered, terrified, no longer endowed with personality.

Sometimes despising herself and resolved to perform her manifest duty, she sought other lessons from Aline. They ended invariably in dismay. Once she learned that Jimmie had never had a banking account. The money was kept in a drawer of which Jimmie and Aline had each a key. On occasions the drawer had been empty. Another lesson taught her that certain shops in the neighbourhood were to be avoided as being too expensive; that cream was regarded as a luxury, and asparagus as an impossible extravagance. Every new fact in the economy of a poor household caused her to shiver with apprehension. All was so trivial, so contemptibly unimportant, and yet it grew to be a sordid barrier baffling her love. She loathed the base weakness of her nature. It was degrading to feel such repulsion.

One evening Connie Deering was going to a Foreign Office reception, and came down an enchanting vision in a new gown from Paquin and exhibited herself to Norma.

"I think it 's rather a success. Don't you?"

Norma assented somewhat listlessly, but to please her friend inspected the creation and listened to her chatter. She was feeling lonely and dispirited. At Aline's entreaty she had persuaded Jimmie to go with Tony Merewether to the Langham Sketch Club, thus showing himself, for the first time since the scandal, among his old associates. For her altruism she paid the penalty of a dull evening. Their visits to each other were her sole occupation now, all that was left in life to interest her. In moments of solitude she began to feel the appalling narrowness of the circle in which she was caged. Reading tired instead of refreshing her. She had been accustomed to men and women rather than to books, to the sight of many faces, to the constant change of scene. When she speculated

on employment for future solitary hours, she thought ruefully of recuffing shirts.

Connie apologised for leaving her, hoped she would manage to amuse herself. Norma, who had made strenuous efforts to hide the traces of tumult, returned a smiling answer. Connie, quite deceived, put an arm round her waist and said suddenly in her bright, teasing way:

"Now don't you wish you were coming too?"

Norma, staggered at the point-blank question, was mistress enough of herself to observe the decencies of reply, but when Connie had gone, she sat down on the sofa and stared in front of her. She did wish she were going with Connie. She had been wishing vaguely, half-consciously all the evening. Now the wish was the pain of craving. It came upon her like the craving of the alcoholic subject for drink — this sudden longing for the glitter, the excitement, the whirl of the life she had renounced. Her indictment of it seemed unreal, the confused memory of a brain-sick mood. It was her world. She had not cut herself free. All the fibres of her body seemed to be rooted in it, and she was being drawn thither by irresistible desire. The many, many people, the diamonds, the brilliance, the flattery, the envy, the very atmosphere heavy with many perfumes — she saw and felt it all; panted for it, yearned for it. That never, never again would she take up her birthright was impossible. That she should stand forevermore in the humble street outside the gates of that dazzling, wonderful, kaleidoscopic world was unthinkable.

She remembered her talk with Morland at the Duchess of Wiltshire's reception at the end of the last season, her shiver at the idea of a life of poverty; was it a premonition? She remembered the blessed sense of security when

she had looked round the splendid scene and felt that she and it were indissoluble parts of the same scheme of things. A crust and heel of cheese as Jimmie's wife had crossed her mind then as a grotesque fantasy; the air of that brilliant gathering was the breath of her being.

But now the grotesque fancy was to be the reality; the other was to become the shadow of a dream. No yearning or panting could restore it. The impossible was the inevitable. The unthinkable was the commonplace. She had made her choice deliberately, irrevocably. She had lost the whole world to gain her own soul. In the despair of her mood she questioned the worth of the sacrifice. The finality of the choice oppressed her. If at this eleventh hour she could still have the opportunity of the heroic — if still the gates of the world were open to her, she would have had a stimulus to continued nobility. The world and the passionate love for the perfect man — which would she choose? Her exaltation would still have swept her to the greater choice. Of this she was desperately aware. But the gates were shut. She had already chosen. The heroic moment had gone. The acceptance of conditions was now mere uninspired duty. She gave way to unreason.

"O God! Why cannot I have both — my own love and my own life?"

The tears she shed calmed her.

The next day she felt ill from the strain, paying the highly bred woman's penalty of nervous break-down. Connie Deering noted the circles beneath her eyes and the pinched nostrils. Norma casually mentioned a night's neuralgia. It would pass off during the day. She refused to be doctored. She would pay a visit to Jimmie before lunch. The fresh air would do her good.

"The fresh air and Jimmie," laughed her friend. "You are the most beautifully in love young woman I have ever met."

Norma started on her visit, walking fast. At Baker Street station it began to rain. She took the penitential omnibus; but her thoughts were too anxious to concern themselves with its discomforts. Besides, it was almost empty. The night had brought counsel. She would go to Jimmie and be her true self, frank and unsparing. With a touch of her old scorn she had resolved to confess unreservedly all the meanness and cowardice of which she had of late been guilty. She would bare to him the soon spotted soul and crave his cleansing. He would understand, pardon, and purify. Perhaps, when he knew all, he would be able to devise some new scheme of existence. At any rate, she would no longer receive his kisses with a lie in her heart. She loved him too ardently. He should know what she was, what were her needs, her limitations. The meeting would be a crisis in their lives. Out of it would come reconstruction on some unshakable basis. Up to a certain point she reasoned; beyond it, the pathetic unreason of a woman drifted rudderless.

It had stopped raining when she left the omnibus and started on the short walk from the corner to Friary Grove. At the familiar gate her heart already seemed lighter; she opened it, mounted the front steps, and rang. The middle-aged servant, minus cap and with thin untidy hair, in a soiled print dress, her sleeves rolled up to the elbow exposing red coarse arms, was the first shock to Norma when the door opened.

"Both the Master and Miss Aline are out, Miss," said Hannah, with a good-natured smile. "He has gone

into town on business, and Miss Aline went out a little while ago with her young man. But they'll be back for lunch. Won't you come in and wait, Miss?"

Norma, vaguely resenting the familiar address of the servant and her slatternly appearance, hesitated for a moment before deciding to enter. Hannah showed her into the drawing-room and retired. It was a small dark room looking on to the back. Part of it had been cut off when the house had been altered, so as to construct the studio staircase, which contained one of the original windows. Norma felt strangely ill at ease in the room. The prim, cheap furniture, the threadbare carpet, the flimsy girlish contrivances at decoration, gave the place an air of shabby gentility. The gilt mirror was starred with spots and had a crack across the corner. Some of Jimmie's socks and underwear lay on the table for mending. They were much darned, and fresh holes could not fail to meet the eye that rested but momentarily on the pile. To mend these would in the future be her duty. She took up an undervest shrinkingly and shook it out; then folded it again and closed her eyes. . . . She could not wait there: the gloom depressed her. The studio would be brighter and more familiar. She went downstairs. Nothing in the room she knew so well was changed, yet it seemed to wear a different aspect. The homely charm had vanished. Here, too, shabbiness and poverty stared at her. The morning light streaming through the great high window showed pitilessly the cracks and stains and missing buttons of the old leathern suite, and the ragged holes in the squares of old carpet laid upon the boards. It was a mere bleak workshop, not a room for human habitation. The pictures on the walls and easels ceased to possess decorative or even inti-

mate value. The large picture of the faun that had exercised so great an influence upon her had been despatched to its purchaser, and in its place was a hopeless gap.

She sat down in her accustomed chair, and once more strove to realise the future. There would be children who would need her care. On herself would all the sordid burdens fall. She saw herself a soured woman, worn with the struggle to make ends meet, working with her hands at menial tasks. The joy of Life! She laughed mirthlessly.

She rose, walked restlessly about the studio, longing for Jimmie to come and exorcise the devils that possessed her. A little sharp cry of distress escaped her lips. The place echoed like a vault, and she felt awfully alone. In her nervous tension she could bear it no longer. She went up the stairs again into the bare hall. On the pegs hung two or three discoloured hats and an old coat. Scarce knowing whither she went, she entered the dining-room. Luncheon had been laid. A freak of destiny had reproduced the meal of which Morland had spoken at Wiltshire House and of which last night had revived the memory: a scrag end of cold boiled mutton, blackened and shapeless, with the hard suet round about it; a dried-up heel of yellow American cheese; the half of a cottage loaf. The table-cloth — it was Friday — was stained with a week's meals. It was coarse in texture, old and thin and darned. The enamel on the plates was cracked, the hundred tiny fissures showing up dark brown. The plate on the forks had worn off in places, disclosing the yellowish metal beneath. The tumblers were thick and common, of glass scarcely transparent. She stared helplessly at the table. Never in her life had she seen such preparations for a meal. To the woman

always daintily fed, daintily environed, it seemed squalor unspeakable.

She shrank back into the hall, pressed her hands to her eyes, looked round, as if to search for some refuge. The stairs met her eye. She had never seen what lay above the ground floor — except once, on the memorable evening when Aline had fainted. Suddenly madness seized her — an insane craving to spy out the whole nakedness of the house. The worn stair-carpet ended at the first landing. Then bare boards. The door of the bathroom was wide open. She peeked in. The ceiling was blackened with gas; the bath cracked and stained; the appointments as bare as those in a workhouse. Her glance fell upon a battered tin dish holding an uncompromising cube of yellow soap with hard sharp edges. She withdrew her head and shut the door hurriedly. Another door stood ajar. She pushed it open and entered. It was the front bedroom — inhabited by Jimmie. The thought that it would be her own, which a fortnight before might have clothed her in delicious confusion, chilled her to the bone. Bare boards again; a strip of oil-cloth by the narrow cheap iron bedstead; a painted deal table with a little mirror and the humblest of toilette equipments laid upon it; a painted deal chest of drawers with white handles; a painted deal wash-stand; a great triangular bit broken out of the mouth of the ewer.

It was poverty — grinding, sordid, squalid poverty. From the one dishevelled, slatternly, middle-aged servant to the cheap paper peeling off the wall in the bedrooms, all she had seen was poverty. The gathering terror of it burst like a thunderstorm above her head. Her courage failed her utterly. Like a creature distracted, she rushed downstairs

and fled from the house. She walked homewards with an instinctive sense of direction. Afterwards she had little memory of the portion of the road she traversed on foot. She moved in a shuddering nightmare. All the love in the world could not shed a glamour over the nakedness of the existence that had now been revealed to her in its entire crudity. She could not face it. Other women of gentle birth had forsaken all and followed the men they loved; they had loved peasants and had led great-heartedly the peasant's life. They had qualities of soul that she lacked. Hideously base, despicably cowardly she knew herself to be. It was her nature. She could not alter. The world of graceful living was her world. In the other she would die. He had warned her. The gipsy faith in Providence had made him regard as a jest what would be to her a sordid shift, an intolerable ugliness, stripping life of its beauty. The passion-flower could not thrive in the hedge with the dog-rose. It was true — mercilessly true. The craving of last night awoke afresh, imperiously insistent. She walked blindly, tripped, and nearly fell. A subconscious self hailed a passing hansom and gave the address.

What would become of her she knew not. She thought wildly of suicide as the only possible escape. From her own world she was outcast. Its gates were barred with gold and opened but to golden keys. She was penniless. In this other world she would die. Love could not prevent her starving on its diet of herbs. She clung to life, to the stalled ox, and recked little of the hatred; but at the banquet she no longer had a seat. She had said she would follow him in rags and barefoot over the earth. She had not fingered the rags when she had made the senseless vow; she had not tried her tender feet on the stones. She could

have shrieked with terror at the prospect. There was no way out but death.

The Garden of Enchantment faded from her mind like a forgotten dream. The sweet Arcadian make-believe alone rose up in ironical mockery, a scathing memory which seemed to flay the living heart of her. She sat huddled together in a corner of the cab, tortured and desperate. On either hand hung the doom of death. In the one case it would be lingering: the soul would die first; the man she loved would be tied to a living corpse; she would be a devastating curse to him instead of a blessing. In the other she could leave him in the fulness of their unsullied love. The years that the locust hath eaten would not stretch an impassable waste between them. In his sorrow there would be the imperishable sense of beauty. And for herself the quick end were better.

She was aroused to consciousness of external things by a husky voice addressing her from somewhere above her head. The cab had stopped at Connie's house in Bryanston Square. She descended, handed to the man the first coin in her purse that her fingers happened to grasp. He looked at it, said that he was sorry he had not change for a sovereign. She waved her hand vaguely, deaf to his words. The cabman, with a clear conscience, whipped up his horse smartly and drove off.

A figure on the doorstep raised his hat.

"How delightful of you to arrive at the very moment, Miss Hardacre! I am summoned back to America. I sail to-morrow. I was calling on the chance of being able to bid you good-bye."

Norma collected her scattered wits and recognised Theodore Weever. She looked at him full in the eyes.

Her lips were parted; her breath came fast. He stretched out his hand to press the electric button, so as to gain admittance to the house. She touched his arm, restraining his action, and still stared at him.

"Wait," she said at last. "I have something to say to you."

"I am honoured," he replied in his imperturbable way.

"Have you found your decorative wife, Mr. Weever?"

A sudden light shone lambently in his pale, expressionless blue eyes.

"Am I to understand that I can find her on Mrs. Deering's doorstep?"

"If you look hard enough," said Norma.

He took her hand and shook it with the air of a man concluding a bargain.

"I felt sure of it," he said. "I intended from the first to marry you. I shall ever be your most devoted servant."

"I make one condition," she said.

"Name it."

"You don't enter this house, and I sail with you to-morrow."

"Certainly."

"What train shall I catch and from what station shall I start?"

"The ten o'clock from Waterloo."

She rang the bell.

"May I trouble you to book my passage?"

"It will be my happiness."

"Au revoir," she said, holding out her hand.

He raised his hat and walked away briskly. The door opened, and Norma entered the house.

Chapter XXVIII

THE WORD OF ALINE

WHAT she wrote to him is no great matter. Her letter, which he opened on coming down to breakfast the next morning, filled many pages. It was a rhapsody of passionate love and self-abasement, with frantic appeals for forgiveness. In its cowardice there was something horribly piteous. Jimmie read it beneath the high north window of the studio, his back turned towards Aline, who was seated at the breakfast-table at the other end. For a long, long while he stood there, quite still, holding the letter in his hand. Aline, in wonder, stole up quietly and touched his arm. When he turned, she saw that his face was ashen-grey, like a dead man's.

The shock left its mark upon him. Physically it accomplished the work of ten years, wiping the youth from his face and setting in its stead the seal of middle age. It is common enough for grief or illness to lay its hand on the face of a woman no longer young and shrivel up her beauty like a leaf and set her free, old and withered. But with a man, who has no such beauty to be marred, the case is rare.

For a week he remained silent. The two women who loved him waited in patience until the time should come for their comforting to be of use. From the very first morning he let no change appear in his habits, but set his

palette as usual and went on with the new picture that was nearing completion. In the afternoon he went for a walk. Aline, going down to the studio, happened to look at his morning's work. For a moment she was puzzled by what she saw, for she was familiar with his methods. Gradually the solution dawned upon her. He had been painting meaninglessly, incoherently, putting in splotches of colour that had no relation to the tone of the picture, crudely accentuating outlines, daubing here, there, and anywhere with an aimless brush. It was the work of a child or a drunken man. Aline cast herself on the model-platform and cried till she could cry no more. When he came back, he took a turpentine rag and obliterated the whole picture. For days he worked incessantly, trying in vain to repaint. Nothing would come right. The elementary technique of his art seemed to have left him. Aline strove to get him away. He resisted. He had to do his day's work, he said.

"But you 're not well, dear," she urged. "You will kill yourself if you go on like this."

"I 've never heard of work killing a man," he answered. Then after a pause, "No. It 's not work that kills."

At last the sleep that had failed him returned, and he awoke one morning free from the daze in the brain against which he had been obstinately struggling. He rose and faced the world again with clear eyes. When Aline entered the studio to summon him to lunch, she found him painting at the unhappy picture with his accustomed sureness of touch. He leaned back and surveyed his handiwork.

"It 's going to be magnificent, is n't it? What a blessing I wiped out the first attempt!"

"Yes, this is ever so much better, Jimmie," the girl replied, with tears very near her eyes. But her heart swelled with happy relief. The aching strain of the past week was over. She had dreaded break-down, illness, and permanent paralysis of his faculties. The man she knew and loved had seemed to be dead and his place taken by a vacant-eyed simulacrum. Now he had come to life again, and his first words sounded the eternal chord of hope and faith.

From that day onwards he gave no sign of pain or preoccupation. Only the stamp of middle age upon his face betrayed the suffering through which he had passed. He concerned himself about Aline's marriage. Arrangements had been made for it to take place on the same day as that of their elders — a day, however, that Norma had never fixed. The recent catastrophe had caused its indefinite postponement. Aline declared herself to be in the same position as before, the responsibility of the beloved's welfare being again thrust upon her shoulders. She pleaded with her lover for delay, and young Merewether, disappointed though he was, acquiesced with good grace. At last Jimmie called them before him, and waving his old briar-root pipe, as he spoke, delivered his ultimatum.

"My dear children," said he, standing up before them, as they sat together on the rusty sofa, "you have the two greatest and most glorious things in a great and glorious world, youth and love. Don't despise the one and waste the other. Get all the beauty you can out of life and you 'll shed it on other people. You 'll shed it on me. That 's why I want you to marry as soon as ever you are ready. You 'll let me come and look at you sometimes, and if you are happy together, as God grant you will

be, that will be my great happiness — the greatest I think that earth has in store for me. I have stood between you long enough — all that is over. I shall miss my little girl, Tony. I should be an inhuman monster if I did n't. But I should be a monster never before imagined by a disordered brain if I found any pleasure in having her here to look after me when she ought to be living her life in fulness. And that 's the very end of the matter. I speak selfishly. I can't help it. I have a great longing for joy around me once more. Go upstairs and settle everything finally between you."

When they had gone, he sighed. "Yes," he said to himself, "a great longing for joy — and the sound of the steps of little children." Then he laughed, calling himself a fool, and went on with his painting.

A day or two afterwards Connie Deering, who had been a frequent visitor since Norma's flight, walked into the studio while Jimmie was working.

"Don't let me disturb you. Please go on," she cried in her bright, airy way. "If you don't, I 'll disappear. I 've only come for a gossip."

Jimmie drew a chair near the easel and resumed his brush. She congratulated him on the picture. It was shaping beautifully. She had been talking about it last night to Lord Hyston, who had promised to call at the studio to inspect it. Lord Hyston was a well-known buyer of modern work.

"He is stocking a castle in Wales, which he never goes near, with acres of paint," she said encouragingly. "So I don't see why you should n't have a look in."

"Is there a family ghost in the castle?"

"I believe there are two!"

"That 's a blessing," said Jimmie. "Some one, at any rate, will look at the pictures."

She watched him in silence for a minute or two. Then she came to the important topic.

"So the two children have made up their minds at last."

"Yes, they are to be married on the twenty-eighth of May."

"Poor young things," said Connie.

"Why poor?"

"I don't know," she said with a sigh. "The subject of marriage always makes me sad nowadays. I am growing old and pessimistic."

"You are bewilderingly youthful," replied Jimmie.

"Do you know how old I am?"

"I have forgotten how to do subtraction," he said, thinking of his own age.

"Yes. Of course you know. It 's awful. And Aline is — what — seventeen?"

"Eighteen."

"You 'll be dreadfully lonely without her."

"Lonely? Oh, no. I have my thoughts — and my memories."

She looked at him fleetingly.

"I should have thought you would wish to escape from memories, Jimmie."

"Why should I?"

"'The sorrow's crown of sorrows.'"

"I don't believe in it," he said, turning towards her. "What has been has been. A joy that once has been is imperishable. Remembering happier things is a sorrow's crown of consolation. Thank God! I have had them to remember."

"Do you think she is finding consolation in memories?"

She spoke with sudden heat, for Norma's conduct had filled her heart with blazing indignation.

"I hope so," said Jimmie dreamily, after a pause. "But she has not so many as I. She loved me deeply. She had her hour — but I had my day."

"If I were you, I should want never to think of her again."

"Not if you were I, my dear Connie," he said gently. "If either of us was in the wrong, it was not she."

"Rubbish," said Mrs. Deering.

"No. It is the truth. She was made for kings' palaces and not for this sort of thing. I knew it was impossible from the first — but the joy and wonder of it all blinded my eyes. She gave me the immortal part of herself. It is mine for all eternity. I wrote to her a day or two ago — I was not able at first. I could not sleep, you know; something seemed to have gone wrong with my head."

"You wrote to her?"

"To tell her not to be unhappy for my sake."

"And you have forgiven her entirely?"

"Since our love is unchanged, how could I do otherwise?"

"But she has gone and thrown herself into the arms of another man — and such a man!" said Connie, brusquely.

A quiver of pain passed over his face.

"Those are things of the flesh that the discipline of life teaches a man to subdue. I think I am man enough for that. The others are things of the spirit. If ever woman loved a man, she loved me. I thank God," he added in a low voice, "that she realised the impossibility before we were married."

"So do I; devoutly," said Connie.

"It would have made all the difference."

"Precisely," said Connie.

"She would have been chained hand and foot to an intolerable existence. She would have fretted and pined. Her life would have been an infinite burden. Heaven's mercy saved her."

"I was n't looking at it from her point of view at all," exclaimed Connie.

"Hers is the only one from which one can look at it," he answered gravely.

When she bade him good-bye some ten minutes later, she did not withdraw the hand which he held. Her forget-me-not eyes grew pleading, and her voice trembled a little.

"I wish I could comfort you, Jimmie — not only now, but in the lonely years to come. But remember, dear, there is nothing on earth I would n't give you or do for you — nothing on earth."

It was not till long afterwards that he fully comprehended the meaning of her words; and then she herself prettily vouchsafed the interpretation. For immediate answer he kissed her on the cheek in the brotherly fashion in which he had kissed her twice before.

"What greater comfort," said he, "can I have than to hear you say that? I am a truly enviable man, Connie. Love and affection are showered upon me in full measure. Life is very, very sweet."

The next two or three weeks brought pleasant surprises which strengthened his conviction. One by one old friends sought him out, and, some heartily, others shamefacedly, extended to him the hand of brotherhood. His evening at

the Langham Sketch Club had inaugurated the new order of things. The Frewen-Smiths, whose New Year party had marked the epoch between child and woman in Aline's life, invited the two outcasts to dinner, and pointedly signified that they were the honoured guests. Brother artists looked in casually on Sunday evenings. Their wives called upon Aline, offering congratulations and wedding-gifts. A lady whose portrait he had painted, and at whose house he had visited, commissioned him to paint the portraits of her two children. The ostracism had been removed. How this had been effected Jimmie could not conjecture; and Tony Merewether and Connie Deering, who were the persons primarily and independently responsible, did not enlighten him. By Aline's wedding-day all the old circle had gathered round him, and a whisper of the true story had been heard in Wiltshire House.

Thus the world began to smile upon him, as if to make amends for the anguish it could not remedy. He took the smile as a proof of the world's essential goodness. The great glory that for a day had made his life a blaze of splendour had faded; the sun in his heaven had been eternally eclipsed. But the lesser glory of the moon and stars remained undimmed; the tenderness of twilight lost no tone of its beauty. He stood unshaken in his faith, unchanged in himself — the strong, wise man looking upon the earth and the fulness thereof with the unclouded eyes of a child.

The man whom he had most loved, the woman he had most worshipped, had each failed him, had each brought upon him bitter and abiding sorrow. They had passed like dead folks out of his daily life. Yet each retained in his heart the once inhabited chambers. They were dear

ghosts. His incurable optimism in this wise brought about its consolation. For optimism involves courage of a serene quality. Aline, with her swift perception of him, had the opportunity of flashing this into an epigram. There was a little gathering in the studio, and the talk ran on personal bravery. Some one started the question: What would the perfectly brave man do if attacked unarmed by a man-eating tiger?

"I know what Jimmie would do," she cried. "He would try to pat the beast on the head."

There was laughter over the girl's unchallenged championship, but those who had ears to hear found the saying true.

The night before the wedding the two sat up very late, spending their last hours together, and Aline sat like a child on Jimmie's knee and sobbed on his breast. The lover seemed a far-away abstraction, a malevolent force rather than a personality, that was tearing her away from the soil in which her life was rooted. Jimmie stroked her hair and spoke brave words. But he had not realised till then the wrench of parting. Till then, perhaps, neither had realised the strength of the bond between them. They were both fervent natures, who felt intensely, and their mutual affection had been a vital part of their lives. If bright and gallant youth had not flashed across the girl's path and, after the human way, had not caught her wondering maidenhood in strong young arms; if deeper and more tragic passion had not swept away the mature man, it is probable that this rare, pure love of theirs might have insensibly changed into the greater need one of the other, and the morrow's bells might have rung for these two. But as it was, no such impulse stirred their exquisite re-

lationship. They were father and daughter without the barrier of paternity; brother and sister without the ties of consanguinity; lovers without the lovers' throb; intimate, passionate friends with the sweet and subtle magic of the sex's difference.

"I can't bear leaving you," she moaned. "I can't bear leaving the dear beautiful life. I'll think of you every second of every minute of every hour sitting here all alone, alone. I don't want to go. If you say the word now, I'll remain and it shall be as it has been for ever and ever."

"I shall miss you — terribly, my dear," said he. "But I'll be the gainer in the end. You'll give me Tony as a sort of younger brother. I am getting to be an old man, darling — and soon I shall find the need of *les jeunes* in my painting life. You can't understand that yet. Tony will bring around me the younger generation with new enthusiasms and fresh impulses. It is to my very great good, dear. And if God gives you children, I'll be the only grandfather they'll ever have, poor things, and I'd like to have a child about me again. I have experience. I have washed your chubby face and hands, *moi qui vous parle*, and undressed you and put you to bed, my young lady who is about to be married."

"Oh, Jimmie, I remember it — and I had to tell you how to do everything."

"It seems the day before yesterday," said Jimmie. "*Eheu fugaces!*"

The next day when she in her wedding-dress (a present from Connie Deering) walked down the aisle on her husband's arm and stole a shy glance at him, radiant, full of the promise and the pride of manhood, and met the glad love in his eyes, she forgot all else in the throbbing

joy of her young life's completion. It was only afterwards when she was changing her dress, with Connie Deering's assistance, in her own little room, that she became again conscience-stricken.

"You *will* look after Jimmie while I am away, *won't* you?" she asked tragically — they were going to the Isle of Wight for their honeymoon.

"I would look after him altogether if he would let me," said Connie, in an abrupt, emotional little outburst.

Aline drew a quick breath.

"What do you mean?"

Connie threw the simple travelling-hat, whose feathers she was daintily touching, upon the bed.

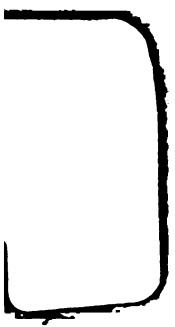
"What do you think I mean?" she laughed nervously. "I'm not an old woman. I'm as lonely as Jimmie will be — and —"

"What?"

"Oh! — only I've found out that I love Jimmie as much as a silly woman can love anybody, if it's any satisfaction to you to know it — and you may be quite sure I'll see that no harm comes to him during your honeymoon, dear."

The ensuing conversation nearly caused the bride to miss her train. But no bride ever left her girlhood's room more luminously happy. On the threshold she turned and threw her arms round Connie Deering's neck.

"I'll arrange it all when I come back," she whispered.

And Aline kept her word.

THE END